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MYSTIC

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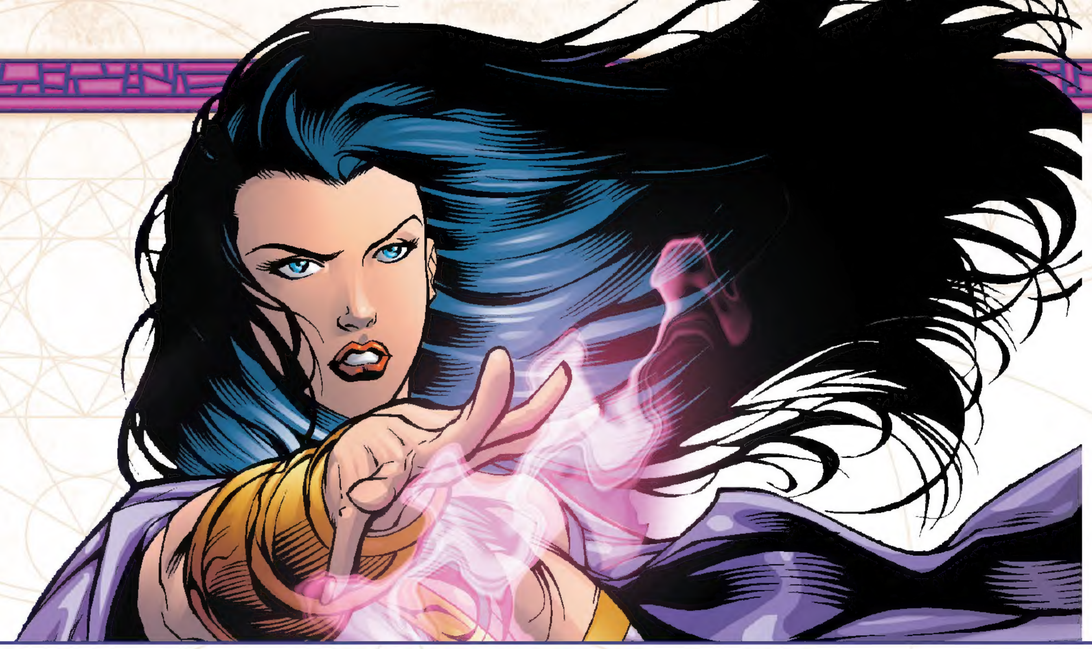
MARZ
FIORENTINO
LOPRESTI
PETERSON

BRAND
DELLEC
ACROSSLEY

MYSTIC



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This place grows colder, my friend. Its energy wanes. I am seeking a solution, and eagerly welcome your thoughts.

It is not like you to be so troubled.

So long ago, when it was all set in motion, it was so... fascinating in its complexity. It surprised even me. Now things are static, worlds grow cold, and what were once glorious fields of battle lay still and barren.

The problem is not simply lazy warriors. The vital energies on which we all depend are fading away... it shouldn't happen like this... yet it is! It is dying, and the First do nothing to prevent it!

Because the First don't understand. They have no idea of the connection between their actions and the Whole.

Yes. They need... motivation. They must be forced to reignite the cycle...

Yet...they know nothing of my existence. To do so would *change* them...

Why look only to the First?

There are many worlds open to you, so many people...

If you were to step in quietly -- walk among them. Then a subtle touch, to add just a small mark of your passage -- a sign.

Your sign.

Imagine... each world, one soul, marked with the sigil. Opened to the power.

Why just one?

I was thinking in terms of efficiency. The number is unimportant. A small number makes for a clear burden on each; too many, and they let someone else do the work.

As we have already seen with the First. Still...

Come...

LET ME SHOW YOU A PLACE ALREADY RICH WITH MYSTERIES. GIVE THEM ANOTHER TO PONDER, AND WHAT HAS BEEN THE UNEASY RITUALISTIC ALLIANCE OF JEALOUS GUILDS SHATTERS!

THESE PEOPLE USE THE ENERGIES OF THE WHOLE TO DO MAGIC AND THEIR DAILY EXISTENCE IS POPULATED WITH MINIATURE MIRACLES. WHEN EXTRAORDINARY EVENTS ARE EVERYDAY LIFE, IT WILL TAKE A PHENOMENAL EVENT TO CAPTURE THEIR ATTENTION.

Ah...this place is so steeped in energies, it makes it possible to believe that things can be made right again!

What will I tell them, these... *Sigil-Bearers?*

GIVE THEM NO WARNING, NO DIRECTION; LET THEIR ACTIONS DICTATE THE FLARE OF THE SIGIL.

THIS WILL REENERGIZE YOUR WARRIORS. BRING THEM BACK TO THEIR PURPOSE. HAVE THEM FIGHT OFF THE CHILL OF THEIR CURRENT ENNUI.

You mean Cross-Generation.

YES, POWER FROM CONFLICT. ENERGY CREATING ENERGY.

AS THE NEW ONES WORK TOWARD THEIR OWN DEFINITION, THEY SERVE YOUR NEEDS.

I TELL YOU, YOU COULD START A NEW CHAIN OF CREATION TO STOKE THE COOLING FIRES OF THE WHOLE.

I FEEL IT GROWING WARMER ALREADY.

I'M GOING TO SHOW YOU SOMETHING YOU'VE NEVER SEEN BEFORE.

QUITE EXCELLENT, ISN'T HE?

MAGICAL, YES?

ENCHANTING. IN THE ***BEST*** SENSE OF THE WORD.

YOU HAVE A FLAIR FOR THE POETIC, STEFAN, YOU REALLY DO.

WHERE ***EVER*** DID YOU COME BY SUCH A CLEVER SPELL?

Shoo.

SHOULDN'T SOMEONE OPEN A WINDOW?

A CARD TRICK...

...HOW POSITIVELY *DREARY.*

Oh PLEASE, GISELLE, NOT AGAIN...

Oh PLEASE GISELLE *YOURSELF*.

YOU'RE SO USED TO THE WHOLE WORLD RUNNING BY MAGIC IT'S ALL YOU CARE ABOUT. A NEW SPELL, THE LATEST INTRIGUE BETWEEN THE GUILDS, ON AND ON.

YOU'RE WELCOME TO IT. I COULDN'T BE LESS INTERESTED.

BIT OF A CURIOUS STANCE FROM SOMEONE WHOSE FAMILY'S ALWAYS BEEN SO HIGHLY PLACED WITHIN A GUILD.

SOMEONE WHOSE ***SISTER*** IS ASCENDING TO GUILD MASTER TOMORROW.

GENEVIEVE LIVES HER LIFE, I LIVE MINE. SHE'S DRIVEN TO SUCCEED...

...BUT SHE NEVER LEARNED HOW TO HAVE FUN.

I DID.

Uh...

...YOUR SISTER...

MY **SISTER.**

MY SISTER'S PRIDED HERSELF ON BEING THE ***RESPONSIBLE*** ONE EVER SINCE WE WERE LITTLE GIRLS.

SHE LOCKED HERSELF AWAY AND STUDIED THE RITUALS AND SPELL CONFIGURATIONS AND WHATEVER OTHER TEDIOUS DRIVEL THEY DRILL INTO YOUR HEAD AT THE GUILD CATHEDRAL.

WHICH IS WHY SHE IS WHERE SHE IS. GENEVIEVE'S A GOOD GIRL.

BUT GOOD GIRLS STAY AT HOME WHILE THE ***REST*** OF US GET INVITED TO THE BEST PARTIES. LET'S FACE IT...

...THIS IS THE ***LAST*** PLACE YOU'D EVER FIND MY SISTER.

Ahem

Oh...

...HI, SIS.

JUST TALKING ABOUT YOU.

I KNOW.

CAN I GET YOU A—

I WANT TO SPEAK TO YOU, GISELLE...

...OUTSIDE.

BUT...

...GENEVIEVE, DON'T...

...COME ON, *LET GO*...

...LET GO!

WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE *DOING?!* EMBARASSING ME IN FRONT OF MY FRIENDS *INTENTIONALLY?*

YOUR FRIENDS.

YOU CALL THAT COLLECTION OF SWELLS AND IDLERS YOUR FRIENDS...

...AND YOU FIT RIGHT IN WITH THEM.

IF YOU'RE GOING TO LIVE YOUR LIFE LIKE THAT, I CAN'T DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT. I'M DONE TAKING CARE OF YOU.

BUT DON'T RUIN THIS FOR ME, GISELLE.

I BECOME GUILD MASTER TOMORROW. THE OTHER GUILD MASTERS ARE PROBABLY IN THE CITY ALREADY.

I SHOULDN'T HAVE TO TRACK YOU DOWN TO MAKE SURE YOU'RE BEHAVING YOURSELF. I DON'T NEED SOME ELEVENTH-HOUR SCANDAL.

SO YOU COME IN THERE AND DRAG ME OUT LIKE A CHILD?

BECAUSE YOU INSIST ON *ACTING* LIKE A CHILD!

I SHOULD KNOW, I'VE TRIED MY BEST TO RAISE YOU SINCE MOTHER AND FATHER DIED...

AND YOU NEVER MISS AN OPPORTUNITY TO THROW THAT IN MY FACE, DO YOU?

YOU NEVER SEEM TO *REMEMBER* IT.

MAYBE IF YOU'D SHOW ME THE SLIGHTEST SIGN OF RESPECT ONCE IN A WHILE...

RESPECT YOU? DON'T YOU MEAN *BE* LIKE YOU?

I'M NOT TELLING YOU TO LIVE MY LIFE. I'M TELLING YOU TO *GET* ONE.

THIS IS PROBABLY THE LAST THING I'LL EVER ASK OF YOU, GISELLE.

GO HOME. STAY OUT OF TROUBLE. BE ON TIME AT THE CEREMONY TOMORROW. AFTER THAT I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU DO.

AND WEAR YOUR GUILD ROBES, NOT SOME TRAMPY THING LIKE YOU HAVE ON NOW. YOU'RE GOING TO A CATHEDRAL...

...NOT A BORDELLO.

Ooh, YOU...

...I COULD JUST... JUST...

FINE.

IF YOU THINK YOU CAN BULLY ME INTO—

RRREEOW

HARUUF RUUF RUUF

Oh NO...

...NO, NO, NO...

...DON'T YOU DARE!

OOF!

HEY, BEAT IT, SCALY!

GRRROWF

GO ON, GET LOST!

SNRF

SO MUCH FOR GOING BACK TO THE PARTY

OKAY, FURRY, WHAT'S YOUR STORY? LOOKING TO GET YOURSELF KILLED OUT HERE? YOU'RE CUTE...

...BUT THOSE ARE THE STRANGEST EYES I'VE EVER SEEN ON A SQUIT.

YOU'RE A STRAY, huh? FEEL THAT WAY MYSELF SOMETIMES.

I THINK WE'D BOTH BETTER CALL IT A NIGHT. DOUBT YOU'VE GOT ANYPLACE ELSE TO GO, YOU MIGHT AS WELL COME HOME WITH ME.

LADY? LOOKIN' FER A RIDE?

DLRF

TAXI

A *MAGIC* TAXI RIDE. WOULDN'T *THAT* JUST BE THE PERFECT END TO A PERFECT EVENING.

WHAT, PEOPLE CAN'T *WALK* ANYMORE?

SO SUIT YOURSELF, *WALK*.

WEIRDO.

YOU KNOW, I THINK I'M GONNA HAVE A BRUISE.

...COULD SHE BE READY? SO YOUNG, I DON T...

...AND THAT SISTER OF HERS...

...SEE WHAT SHE WAS WEARING? I MEAN REALLY...

...DIDN'T KNOW MASTER ALES WAS SO CLOSE TO...

...DRESS IS JUST FABULOUS ON YOU...

...I DID ONCE, BUT I CERTAINLY DON'T TELL PEOPLE...

...TRULY EXPECT THINGS TO CHANGE?

...LIKE ANYTHING ELSE, IT'S WHO YOU KNOW...

...DON'T TRUST MAGUS IN THE LEAST...

...NOT TRULY INTERESTED IN EVEN BEING HERE, BUT...

...WELL, *I* HEAR SHE'S NOTHING SPECIAL AFTER ALL...

...PREFER NOT TO BE STUCK AT THE BACK OF THE CATHEDRAL...

YEEP!

...GETTING CLOSE TO THAT TIME, ISN'T IT?

fuff fuff fuff

FRRF?

YOU'RE HERE...

...AND ON TIME, TOO. THANK YOU.

YOU DIDN'T *ACTUALLY* THINK I'D LET YOU DOWN, DID YOU?

I...

...NO. I DIDN'T THINK SO. NOT REALLY.

GISELLE, WHAT'S ABOUT TO HAPPEN OUT THERE...TAKING THE GUILD SPIRIT INTO MYSELF AND BECOMING MASTER... YOU KNOW IT'S WHAT I'VE ALWAYS WANTED.

BUT I DON'T KNOW HOW IT'S GOING TO CHANGE ME. I DON'T KNOW EXACTLY WHO I'M GOING TO BE AFTER-WARD.

I'D RATHER THAT DIDN'T HAPPEN WITH THINGS... LIKE THEY ARE BETWEEN US.

YOU MEAN LAST NIGHT. *I'M SORRY.* I THOUGHT ABOUT IT AND... I WAS JUST BEING ME.

HERE, YOU HAVE TO BE PRESENTABLE.

GEN, YOU'RE FINALLY GETTING WHAT YOU'VE WORKED FOR ALL THESE YEARS. I'M HAPPY FOR YOU...

...AND WE'RE *FINE.*

THANKS.

LET'S GO, SIS. YOU'RE ON.

ADHERENTS, HONORED GUESTS...

...I SPEAK FOR THIS GUILD, AND CALL THIS RITE TO ORDER.

WHAT IS ABOUT TO TRANSPIRE WITHIN THESE WALLS IS ANCIENT, UNBROKEN TRADITION. A MASTER EXPIRES, A MASTER IS BORN.

BEARING WITNESS ARE THEY WHO PROTECT CIRESS FROM HARM, THEY WHO RULE WITH COMPASSION, THEY WHO ARE ABOUT TO ACCEPT A NEW MEMBER INTO THEIR CIRCLE...

...THE MASTERS OF OUR SIX FELLOW GUILDS.

MAGUS OF THE PARK MAGI GUILD...

...MONDRU OF THE ASTRAL GUILD...

...ATYAAH OF THE DJINN GUILD...

...ZAI OF THE SHAMAN GUILD...

...VASHUA OF THE TANTRIC GUILD...

...AND YINMA OF THE ENCHANTRESS GUILD...

...GATHERED FOR THE ASCENSION OF ***GENEVIEVE VILLARD*** TO MASTER OF THE NOUVEAU GUILD.

IN TIME NOW MEMORY, THE SEVEN CAME TOGETHER AS ONE TO DEFEND CIRESS FROM A THREAT BEYOND ALL THAT IS.
WHEN THE BEAST WAS VANQUISHED, THE SEVEN TOOK ITS ENERGY INTO THEMSELVES, AND ATTAINED SPIRITUAL LIFE EVERLASTING.
THE SPIRITS OF EACH OF THOSE MASTERS LIVE ON... PASSED DOWN THROUGH GENERATIONS OF THEIR SUCCESSORS, EACH NEW MASTER A LIVING VESSEL...
...EACH NEW MASTER THE LIVING EMBODIMENT OF THEIR GUILD'S ACCUMULATED KNOWLEDGE.
TODAY WE WITNESS THE PASSAGE. FROM WILLING DEATH COMES ETERNAL LIFE.
THERE IS NO HIGHER HONOR. THERE IS NO HIGHER POWER.
THUS HAS IT BEEN...
...THUS IT IS NOW...
...THUS IT SHALL ALWAYS BE.

CONGRATULATIONS.

SORRY? DO I KNOW YOU?

CONGRATULATIONS.

I'M SURE YOU'RE PROUD.

IT'S A GREAT RESPONSIBILITY. NOT *TOO* GREAT, I TRUST.

Uh, THANKS, I...

...um, HELLO?

WHERE'D HE GO?

AND WHY DOES MY HAND FEEL SO...

...STRANGE?

EXCUSE ME, I THINK...

...I THINK MAYBE I'D BETTER GET SOME AIR...

IN THE *MIDDLE* OF THE RITE?

AHH!

THIS ISN'T *SUPPOSED* TO HAPPEN, IS IT?

SOME-THING'S WRONG.

PARDON ME, LET ME *THROUGH*...

=HHUHKK=

NAROTH'S NAME, WHAT IS SHE RAVING ABOUT?

OUT OF MY *WAY!* I HAVE TO GET...

...OUTSIDE...

PLEASE...

...IT'S NOT SUPPOSED TO BE ME!

AHHNNN...

SSSSSS

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mmmmnnn...

...what's...

...WHERE DID THAT COME FROM?

GISELLE...

...WHAT HAVE YOU *DONE?*

MY RITE OF ASCENSION IS *RUINED.* I'VE BEEN *SHAMED* IN FRONT OF THE OTHER MASTERS...

...AND WORSE, I DIDN'T RECEIVE THE SPIRIT MEANT FOR ME.

I... I KNOW.

I RECEIVED IT.

I THINK I RECEIVED *ALL* OF THEM.

YOU *WHAT?*

I DON'T ***KNOW*** WHAT HAPPENED. THIS... ***MAN*** I'VE NEVER SEEN BEFORE, HE TOUCHED ME AND MY HAND FELT STRANGE, AND THEN THE SPIRITS WERE CHASING ME AND SOMEHOW...

...THEY WENT INTO ME.

YOU CAN *SEE* WHAT IT DID TO MY GUILD ROBES.

MY OWN SISTER.

...I THINK IT MIGHT HAVE SOMETHING TO DO WITH ***THIS***. IT JUST... APPEARED.

I SWEAR, EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENED WAS AN ACCIDENT.

HOW ***COULD*** YOU, GISELLE?

YOU KNOW WHAT THIS MEANS TO ME, YOU KNOW HOW LONG I'VE WANTED IT.

GENEVIEVE, ***PLEASE***. I DIDN'T DO IT ON PURPOSE. I THINK...

...BUT YOU MIGHT WELL HAVE DESTROYED THE BALANCE BETWEEN THE GUILDS. AND ALL YOU CAN TELL ME IS IT WAS AN *ACCIDENT.*

YOU NEVER CHANGE, GISELLE, AND I'M ALWAYS LEFT TO CLEAN UP THE MESS. *I'M* THE ONE WHO HAS TO GO BACK IN THERE AND GIVE THEM SOME SORT OF EXPLANATION.

AN ACCIDENT.

HOW MANY TIMES, GISELLE? HOW MANY TIMES HAVE I HEARD THAT WHEN YOU CAN'T LIVE UP TO YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES?

NOT ONLY HAVE YOU DESTROYED WHAT I'VE BEEN TRYING TO ACHIEVE MY ENTIRE LIFE...

PLEASE, GEN, I'M JUST AS—

AAA!

WHAK!

STOP IT.

FOR ONCE...

...JUST STOP IT.

DON'T YOU DARE WALK AWAY FROM...

...ME...

BUT I DIDN'T... MEAN TO DO THAT.

HOW DID I MAKE...?

Hey, don't look at me.

DID YOU JUST... ...TALK?

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FIRST THAT WEIRD GUY COMES UP AND SHAKES MY HAND...

...THEN MY HAND GOES ALL TINGLY AND STRANGE...

...THEN THE GUILD SPIRITS CHASE ME OUT OF THE CATHEDRAL...

...AND GET DRAWN *INTO* ME...

....AND NOW THIS *THING* WON'T COME OFF MY HAND.

Y'know, maybe it isn't supposed to.

I... *DIDN'T* IMAGINE IT. YOU'RE REALLY TALKING TO ME.

THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING.

MY GUILD ROBES SHREDDED INTO...

...INTO WHATEVER *THIS* IS...

...A STRAY SQUIT THAT *TALKS*. WOULD SOMEBODY *PLEASE* TELL ME WHAT'S—

THIS IS NOT THE VESSEL I WAS INTENDED TO INHABIT.

WHO?

WHO SAID THAT?

Who said **what?**

I'VE ALREADY GOT ***YOU*** TALKING TO ME, I DON'T NEED VOICES IN MY—

I'VE BEEN SHORN FROM THE CHOSEN MASTER! WHAT MANNER OF POWER ACCOMPLISHED THIS?

ARE WE ALL TRAPPED?

IN THIS FORM? SHE KNOWS NOTHING OF THE WAYS.

AT THE LEAST SHE IS FEMALE.

AND FROM THE **LOOK** OF HER SHE'LL SERVE **MY** PURPOSES.

FICKLE, AS EVER. WE WERE UNWILLINGLY DRAWN. THIS WILL NOT STAND.

I EMBODY ALL THAT IS MY GUILD. MY ACOLYTES MUST NOT BE DEPRIVED OF THEIR HERITAGE.

YET WE ARE PREVENTED FROM DEPARTING. HOW CAN THIS BE?

THE HOST IS INFERIOR, BUT WE ARE BOUND TO HER.

THERE IS POWER HERE, ALONG WITH IGNORANCE. SHE BEARS A **MARK.**

PLEASE STOP IT.

ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?

GO AWAY...

...JUST GO AWAY!

Uh, I...

...SORRY...

...DIDN'T MEAN TO DISTURB YOU. I'LL LEAVE YOU ALONE, NO PROBLEM...

NO, WAIT, I WASN'T TALKING TO *YOU*...

...REALLY, I DIDN'T MEAN THAT.

YOU *WON'T* BITE MY HEAD OFF?

NOT EVEN A NIBBLE.

OKAY...

...AS LONG AS YOU'RE SURE.

POSITIVE.

THANKS FOR BEING CONCERNED. IT'S BEEN... WELL, IT'S BEEN A VERY STRANGE DAY.

I'M *GISELLE*. GISELLE VILLARD.

THIERRY CHEVALIER. PLEASED TO—

YEEF!

WHAT'S GOT *YOU* ALL EXCITED?

ALPHONSE!

GRROWF

NEEP!

COME ON, I GOTCHA.

DOWN, ALPHONSE! **BAD** GORK!

EVER HEAR OF A ***LEASH?*** THIS SQUIT HAD A BAD EXPERIENCE WITH ONE OF THOSE THINGS.

Ah, HE'S A PRETTY GOOD BOY, HE JUST GETS EXCITED.

SIT, ALPHONSE.

YOU ALMOST SEEM LIKE YOU'VE HAD A BAD EXPERIENCE, IF YOU DON'T MIND ME SAYING SO. YOU OKAY?

FINE, I JUST... I'M STILL FIGURING OUT WHAT HAPPENED TO ME, BUT IT'S NOT YOUR PROBLEM.

I NEED TO GET HOME AND LIE DOWN.

AND CHANGE MY CLOTHES.

SORRY, I HAVE TO RUN. IT WAS NICE MEETING YOU.

HANG ON...

...I WANTED TO... THE REAL REASON I APPROACHED YOU IS... SEE, I'M AN *ARTIST.*

NOT THE HANGING-IN-THE-GALLERY KIND, NOT YET ANYWAY, MORE LIKE THE STREET-CORNER KIND, AND THERE'S JUST...

...LOOK, I SWEAR I'M NOT A PERVERT OR ANYTHING...

...BUT YOU'D BE AN AMAZING SUBJECT. YOU'VE GOT SOMETHING *INSIDE* YOU AND I'D LOVE TO PAINT IT.

Oh.

THAT'S VERY FLATTERING. REALLY.

BUT BELIEVE ME, I'VE GOT *ENOUGH* ON MY MIND RIGHT NOW. I DON'T THINK IT'S A VERY GOOD IDEA.

SURE, I UNDER-STAND.

LISTEN, I DON'T MEAN TO BE PUSHY OR ANYTHING...

...BUT WHY DON'T YOU TAKE MY CARD JUST IN CASE.

MAYBE WHATEVER IT IS WILL WORK ITSELF OUT AND YOU'LL CHANGE YOUR MIND.

OKAY, BUT...NO PROMISES.

THIERRY CHEVALIER

3 AVE OF INCANTATIO

5.698.048

BYE.

BYE.

YEAH, I KNOW, I ALWAYS LIKE THE CRAZY ONES.

GRRUF

WHAT BELONGS TO US...

...HAS BEEN STOLEN FROM US.

THIS MORNING'S RITE OF ASCENSION WAS AN AFFRONT LIKE NO OTHER IN THE HISTORY OF THE JOINED GUILDS.

THE UNTHINKABLE HAS HAPPENED. WE WHO ARE CHARGED WITH THE SAFEGUARDING OF OUR WORLD...

...WE WHO ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR KEEPING AT BAY THAT WHICH THREATENS CIRESS, HAVE BEEN STRIPPED OF WHAT IS RIGHTFULLY OURS.

THE ETERNAL SPIRITS OF THE FOUNDERS HAVE BEEN WRENCHED FROM US.

WE GUILD MASTERS ARE LEFT WITHOUT GUIDANCE.

WHAT ARE WE GOING TO *DO* ABOUT IT?

WE'RE GOING TO KEEP THE POPULATION FROM FINDING OUT.

EVEN *YOU* COULDN'T WITHSTAND THE POLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF THE PEOPLE DISCOVERING WE NO LONGER SPEAK WITH THE AUTHORITY OF THE SPIRITS.

YOUR GRASP OF THE PAINFULLY OBVIOUS NEVER CEASES TO IMPRESS, ATYAAH. THANK YOU *SO MUCH* FOR POINTING THAT OUT.

BRING HER.

SHE ONLY AWAITS A SUMMONS.

SEVEN SPIRITS...

...I'M TRULY IN THE SANCTUM OF MASTERS.

YOU'RE NOT HERE TO ***SIGHTSEE.***

YOU WELL KNOW WHY YOU'RE PRESENT, GENEVIEVE VILLARD.

OUR SPIRITS WERE RIPPED FROM US—FROM ***ALL*** OF US—AT ***YOUR*** RITE OF ASCENSION.

WHY?

I'M *SORRY*. YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND, I'VE STRIVEN ALL MY LIFE TO BECOME GUILD MASTER.

THE LAST THING I EVER WANTED WAS FOR THE CEREMONY TO BE DISRUPTED. BUT SOME-THING...

...UNFORESEEN...

...OCCURRED.

YOU *MUST* KNOW MORE THAN THAT. YOU INTENDED TO *BE* ONE OF US.

I *DON'T* KNOW WHY IT HAPPENED...

...I DO KNOW *WHAT* HAPPENED.

GENEVIEVE, YOU'RE AMONG YOUR PEERS. YOUR *FRIENDS*. WE COULD EVEN PROCLAIM YOU ACTING MASTER OF THE NOUVEAU GUILD...

...WITH THE INTENT OF MAKING IT PERMANENT ONCE THIS UNPLEASANTNESS HAS BEEN CLEARED UP. PLEASE...

I...

...I'M...

...IT WAS MY *SISTER*.

YOUR *SISTER?*
Oh DEAR, DEAR. THIS IS UNPRECEDENTED.
HOW IS SUCH A THING *POSSIBLE?*
I'M NOT SURE. *SHE* DOESN'T EVEN UNDERSTAND HOW SHE COULD'VE DONE IT, BUT SOMEHOW THE SPIRITS WERE PULLED INTO GISELLE, ALL SEVEN OF THEM.
SHE DOESN'T EVEN *WANT* THEM.
WELL THEN, SHE NEEDN'T WORRY HERSELF OVER IT. SHE WON'T BE KEEPING THE SPIRITS...
...NOT AFTER WE *BRING HER* TO US.

NO.

NO, NO, NO...

...GISELLE, *PLEASE,* DON'T EVEN ASK. YOU KNOW WHAT THE LEASE SAYS, NO NON-FAMILIAR PETS IN THE BUILDING.

AND CONSIDERING YOUR DISPOSITION ABOUT MAGIC, IT'S *OBVIOUSLY* NOT A FAMILIAR.

COME ON, CLAUDE, IT'S JUST A LITTLE SQUIT, A STRAY.

TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH, I SMUGGLED HIM IN LAST NIGHT ANYWAY.

HOW CAN YOU SAY NO TO THAT FACE?

nrf?

THAT FACE, EASY. *YOURS...*

...JUST DON'T TELL ANYONE, *OKAY?* AND IF YOU GET CAUGHT...

LEAVE YOUR NAME OUT OF IT. LIKE ALWAYS.

FOYER?

THANKS, THAT'D BE GREAT.

SO WHAT'S WITH THE...

...YOU KNOW, *THE OUTFIT?*

DON'T ASK.

I JUST WANT TO GET OUT OF IT.

I GUESS, I'LL, um...

...I'LL JUST LET YOU HANDLE THAT.

I'LL BE OUTSIDE. IF YOU NEED ME.

OKAY, BYE.

I'LL BRING YOU SOME WATER.

Yeah, you do that.

IT TALKS TO ME *AND* GIVES ME ATTITUDE.

NO WONDER I'VE GOT NO USE FOR MAGIC.

HERE, I'M GOING TO GO CHANGE OUT OF THIS GET-UP.

Don't let **me** stop ya.

Hey, would it kill ya to tidy up once in a while? I mean, really, look at—

eep

AMISH JOSH

We might have a slight **problem** here!

WHAT'S GOTTEN INTO YOU? SOMETHING BEHIND THIS IS ***BOTHERING*** YOU?

Oh, I think what's behind there is gonna bother **you** a lot more than it does me.

HELLO? IS SOMEONE...

WHAT, NOBODY LIKES *SURPRISES* ANYMORE?

SKRAASH

C'MERE, SWEETIE...

AAA!

...MY BOSS WANTS TO HAVE A WORD.

BY THE WAY, CUTE SUIT.

YOUR *BOSS?* WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? PLEASE...

THIS HAS THE STINK OF ONE OF YOURS.

*WHAT OF IT? YOU CAN'T BE **PLEASED** WITH THE SITUATION AS IT STANDS.*

...JUST LEAVE ME ALONE.

PLEASED? NO...

...BUT NEITHER WILL I HAVE ONE OF MY FOLLOWERS TREATED SO RUDELY BY YOUR SERVANT.

GAAAH!

A BIT OVERPROTECTIVE OF A COMMON THIEF, AREN'T YOU?

WELL THAT SMARTS.

I DIDN'T *MEAN* TO DO THAT...

...DID I?

'Scuse me, could we pay a **little** more attention here!

LADY, LOOK, THIS IS MY JOB. DON'T MAKE IT MORE DIFFICULT, OKAY?

PERHAPS YOU'RE CONTENT TO HAVE AN UTTER NOVICE SERVE AS YOUR VESSEL.

I'M NOT.

AFF!

SO YOU EXPECT I WON'T **SHIELD** HER?

SEE WHATCHA MADE ME DO?

I'M NOT A BAD GUY...NO MORE SO THAN THE ***NEXT*** INFERNAL MINION... BUT I GOT A FAMILY TO FEED, SO—

NNFF

YES, AN UTTER NOVICE...

HEY!

...BUT ONE WITH A CONNECTION TO A **GREAT** SOURCE OF POWER.

Oh, THAT'S JUST GREAT.

THANK YOU ***VERY*** MUCH.

THAT **IS** WORTHY OF MY PROTECTION.

INDEED, BUT HOW CAPABLE IS SHE?

A SPELL OF WARDING!

PURSUE AN ASTRAL ATTACK!

WHAT... WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO TELL ME?

PLEASE, I CAN'T *KEEP UP!*

CAN'T KEEP UP WITH *WHAT?*

DON'T TAKE THIS THE WRONG WAY, BUT YOU'RE A *FLAKE.*

hkk

YOU'RE ALSO A PAIN IN MY BUTT.

PUT UP A PRETTY GOOD FIGHT THERE FOR A LITTLE WHILE.

I LIKE THAT.

BUT YOU'RE *DONE* NOW.

WE'RE READY. BRING US IN.

BOY, ARE *YOU* IN TROUBLE.

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HEY...

...HEY, LADY...

...YOU *IN* THERE?

COME ON, WAKEY WAKEY.

mmnnn...

LADY?

...whuzz...

...WHAT'S GOING ON? WHERE...

...YOU AGAIN!

I DON'T KNOW *WHERE* YOU CAME FROM, BUT I WANT YOU OUT OF...

...MY...

...APARTMENT...

WHERE AM I?

PLEASE, PLEASE...

...THERE'S REALLY NO NEED TO BE ALARMED.

MY FELLOW GUILD MASTERS WOULD AGREE, I'M SURE.

I ASSUME INTRODUCTIONS AREN'T NECESSARY? YOU MUST REMEMBER *US* FROM THE RITE OF ASCENSION...

...BECAUSE WE CERTAINLY REMEMBER *YOU,* GISELLE VILLARD. WELCOME TO OUR SANCTUM.

YOUR SANCTUM?

BUT HOW DID YOU EVEN...?

THEY *KNOW* WHAT HAPPENED, GISELLE...

...I TOLD THEM.

YOU... *TOLD* THEM? GENEVIEVE, HOW COULD YOU BETRAY ME LIKE THAT?

BETRAY *YOU?*

YOU'VE GOT IT BACKWARDS, DON'T YOU THINK? ***YOU'RE*** THE ONE WHO TOOK WHAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN MINE.

YOU'RE THE ONE WHO STOLE WHAT BELONGS TO ALL THE MASTERS.

I'VE ALREADY ***SAID*** I DON'T KNOW HOW IT HAPPENED. I DIDN'T DO IT ON PURPOSE!

AND ISN'T THAT ***ALWAYS*** YOUR EXCUSE?

I TOLD YOU NOT TO WALK AWAY FROM ME LAST TIME, GENEVIEVE...

...AND I *MEANT* IT.

OHH?!

I'M STILL NOT SURE HOW THAT KIND OF SORCERY IS SUMMONED BY SOME-ONE WITH ABSOLUTELY NO MAGICAL EDUCATION...

...BUT I *EARNED* THE POWER AT MY DISPOSAL.

LADIES!

DO I REALLY HAVE TO SEPARATE YOU TWO? PLAY NICE.

Oh, I'M SURE OUR GUESTS WILL BEHAVE THEMSELVES. WE'RE *ALL* FRIENDS HERE.

I DON'T IMAGINE WE'LL HAVE FURTHER NEED OF YOU.

THAT FIGURES...

...NOT LIKE YA EVER BOTHER TO SAY THANKS.

NOW THEN...

...YOU HAVE SOMETHING THAT BELONGS TO US, THOUGH I CAN'T BEGIN TO GUESS HOW YOU ACCOMPLISHED IT.

NEITHER CAN I...

...BUT I'M SURE THIS MARK IS PART OF IT.

I DON'T KNOW HOW IT GOT THERE, NOT ***REALLY,*** BUT I THINK IT'S WHAT DREW THE SPIRITS INTO ME.

Hmmm.

I'VE NEVER SEEN ITS LIKE.

NO, NEITHER HAVE I.

THAT'S CERTAINLY NO SHAMANIC GLYPH.

IT'S NOTHING TO DO WITH ANY OF THE GUILDS, MAJOR ***OR*** LESSER.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT IS, BUT I KNOW I DON'T ***WANT*** IT.

I DON'T WANT THE VOICES I HEAR IN MY HEAD, I DON'T WANT ANYTHING TO DO WITH MAGIC OR THE GUILDS.

SO JUST... TAKE IT ALL BACK, OKAY?

TAKE IT BACK AND *SHE* CAN GET WHAT SHE'S ALWAYS WANTED.

THEN IT SEEMS WE *ALL* WANT THE SAME THING.

AND... YOU CAN MAKE THAT HAPPEN?

I SHOULD THINK THE COMBINED INCANTATIONS OF SEVEN...

...WELL, *SIX* GUILD MASTERS AND ONE MASTER IN WAITING...

...WILL BE MORE THAN ENOUGH TO FREE THE SPIRITS...

...AND YOU...

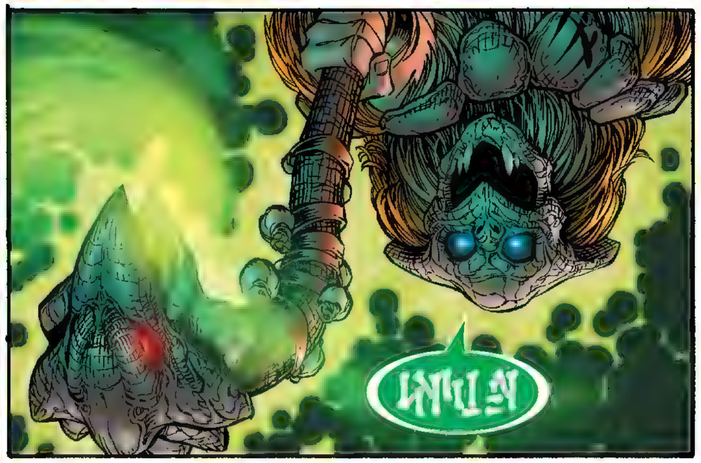
...FROM THIS SITUATION. DON'T WORRY...

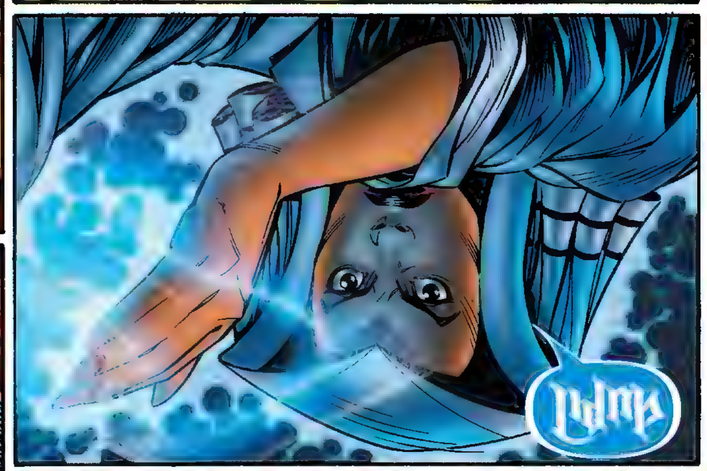
...EVERYTHING WILL GO AS PLANNED.

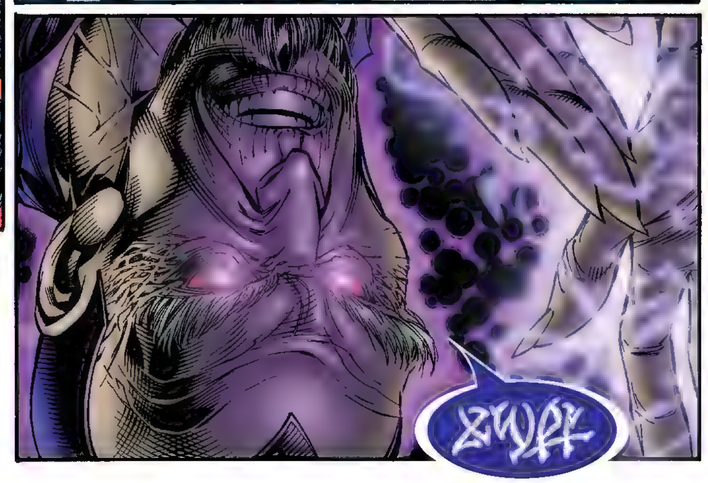
GENEVIEVE, THE PART YOU'VE PLAYED IN THIS WON'T BE FORGOTTEN.

I THINK WE'RE READY.

NN







RELEASE

OUR BONDAGE IS AT AN END

TAKE ME FROM THIS BODY

DRAW US FROM THIS UNWORTHY HOST

THE TIES MUST BE SEVERED

WE MUST RETURN TO OUR PROPER VESSELS

FRRRCE

USSSS!

FREE US NOW.

I CANNOT EMBRACE YOU, SISTER.

MISTRESS ADAYA? PLEASE, I'M READY TO RECEIVE YOUR BLESSED SPIRIT.

DESPITE YOUR DEDICATION, IT'S NOT GOING TO BE YOU.

WHAT'S WRONG? WHY DO THEY ALL HESITATE?

WE'RE ANCHORED TO THE WOMAN. SOMETHING PREVENTS OUR FREEDOM.

WE'LL NOT ABIDE THIS!

DAMN YOU, MAGUS! YOU CAN'T LEAVE US TRAPPED IN THIS VESSEL!

IF THE *VESSEL* FETTERS YOU...

...THE VESSEL CAN BE *DESTROYED.*

AAHH!

WHAT ARE YOU DOING? CAN'T YOU SEE YOU'RE ALL *HURTING* HER!

YOU SEEMED PERFECTLY WILLING TO DO THE SAME MOMENTS AGO.

AAHNN

WERE YOU NAÏVE ENOUGH TO THINK IT WOULDN'T COME TO THIS?

BUT SHE'S MY *SISTER!*

IF YOU MEAN TO BE ONE OF US, THIS IS WHAT'S REQUIRED!

THEN *NO.*

NO...

GAHH!

...I WON'T BE ONE OF YOU.

ZAP

I MIGHT NOT THINK MUCH OF HER ATTITUDE...

...OR HER FASHION SENSE...

...BUT SHE'S STILL MY SISTER, AND I'LL TURN HER LOOSE BEFORE I LET YOU DO THIS TO HER.

UF!

DRAWN TO HER AGAIN

WHY DOES SHE HAVE THIS POWER OVER US?

DON'T ANY OF YOU UNDERSTAND YET? SHE'S BEEN MARKED.

HOW *DARE* YOU BETRAY US!

ZAH

AHG!

I CAN HELP YOU, GISELLE.

WHERE...

...WHERE DID *YOU* COME FROM?

Big red guy with the horns brought me same time as he brought you. You don't remember?

I...

...WELL, NO.

Huh. How 'bout that.

Anyway, looks like you got, what, like six seconds before the magic brain trust comes back here and wipes you out.

So maybe you better think about putting that thing to use. Supposed to be pretty powerful, right?

Time you started being in **control** of that sigil rather than being **afraid** of it.

EVEN IF I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT MAGIC?

*YOU CAN BE THE MOST POWERFUL **MYSTIC** CIRESS HAS EVER KNOWN, GISELLE. THERE'S VAST KNOWLEDGE HERE FOR THE TAKING.*

SHE HAS NO RIGHT TO IT!

AND YOU CAN DO NOTHING TO STOP HER FROM HARNESSING IT.

SINCE I'M NOT CRAZY ABOUT THE OTHER OPTION, *OKAY.*

BUT IF WE'RE GOING TO BE STUCK WITH EACH OTHER...

...LET'S NOT FORGET WHO'S IN CHARGE.

GNF!

SHE USES OUR KNOWLEDGE AGAINST OUR OWN MASTERS!

DRAW UPON WHAT'S WITHIN YOU, GISELLE.

THE GUILD MASTERS REMAIN POWERFUL SORCERERS IN THEIR OWN RIGHT...

...BUT THEY NO LONGER COMMAND THE KNOWLEDGE OF AGES.

YOU DO. YOU KNOW ALL THAT WE SPIRITS KNOW...

...YOU SIMPLY DON'T YET **KNOW** THAT YOU KNOW.

ANANSI

Given life from grains of sand
A meager tool for a Master's command
When called my kind are obliged to obey
My task to dispatch a THIEF this day

UFF?!

MY DJINN!

HOW DID YOU IMAGINE YOUR CREATURE COULD RESTRAIN HER, JINAI?

SKSS

EVEN IN HER IGNORANCE, SHE'S AT LEAST THEIR EQUAL.

Nice job staying in one piece this long, but I think it's time to scoot.

YOU'VE EARNED A STANDOFF, GISELLE. YOU CAN'T HOPE FOR MORE AT THE MOMENT.

WHAT ABOUT GENEVIEVE?

THERE ISN'T TIME. YOU NEED TO BE REMOVED **NOW.**

WAIT...

...WHERE ARE YOU TAKING ME?

AWAY.

GISELLE VILLARD...

...WE'RE ***FAR*** FROM DONE WITH YOU.

OHHHHHH...

Not bad as getaways go, but your landings could use a little work.

CAREFUL THERE...

...I'D HATE FOR ANYTHING TO HAPPEN TO YOU.

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YOU AIDED HER!

WE'RE STILL TRAPPED BECAUSE OF YOU!

IT WAS THE ONLY THING TO BE DONE!

I DON'T NECESSARILY DISAGREE, MAGUS...

HR

...BUT HAVING YOU TWO FOOLS AT EACH OTHER'S THROATS HELPS OUR SITUATION HOW?

JINAI'S RIGHT. THIS IS POINTLESS.

YOU ALL WANT TO BE RETURNED TO YOUR PROPER GUILDS, TO YOUR ACCUSTOMED VESSELS.

BUT AT PRESENT THERE'S NO WAY OF BRINGING THAT ABOUT.

THIS WOMAN IS LIKE NO OTHER WE'VE ENCOUNTERED. WE HAVE LITTLE OR NO POWER OVER HER.

THE WISE COURSE NOW IS TO LEARN MORE OF OUR CIRCUMSTANCE. WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND HOW WE WERE IMPRISONED, BEFORE WE CAN KNOW HOW WE'LL BE FREED.

CENTURIES OF EXISTENCE MUST'VE TAUGHT YOU ALL SOME BIT OF PATIENCE.

...BUT I'M A BIT MORE DISCERNING.

ONE HOST MAY SERVE AS WELL AS ANOTHER FOR YOU, ALAIN...

SO STILL YOUR TONGUES...

...AND BIDE YOUR TIME.

WHO...

...WHO ARE YOU?

I'M NOT GOING TO HURT YOU. I'M A FRIEND.

MY NAME IS—

FREEF!

Hn?

FERF!

HST HST!

GO ON, MOVE ALONG, YOU MANGY LITTLE—

DON'T HURT HIM!

HE'S *MINE*, PLEASE...

...PLEASE, DON'T HURT HIM...

OF COURSE I WON'T HURT HIM.

THERE NOW, WHATEVER'S HAPPENED TO YOU, IT'S *OVER*. YOU'RE SAFE...

eep

...AND A FACE THIS PRETTY SHOULDN'T BE STAINED WITH TEARS.

MY NAME IS *DARROW.* I'M HONORED TO MAKE YOUR ACQUAINTANCE.

I'M GISELLE.

GISELLE VILLARD.

PLEASED TO MEET YOU TOO.

Um... DARROW? IS THAT A FIRST NAME, OR A LAST NAME, OR...WHAT EXACTLY?

JUST DARROW. THAT'S ALL.

VILLARD IS A NAME I'VE HEARD BEFORE.

THE SAME VILLARD WHO WAS TO BE NOUVEAU GUILD MASTER UNTIL YESTERDAY'S RITE WAS DISRUPTED?

DOES *THAT* HAVE SOMETHING TO DO WITH HOW YOU ENDED UP HERE?

THAT'S MY SISTER, GENEVIEVE. SHE WAS ***SUPPOSED*** TO BE GUILD MASTER, BUT...

...oh, I'VE MADE SUCH A MESS OF THINGS.

IT CAN'T BE ALL ***THAT*** BAD. IF YOU TELL ME WHAT'S WRONG...

...MAYBE I CAN HELP.

THERE MUST BE QUITE A TALE TO HOW YOU CAME TO APPEAR IN AN ALLEY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT WEARING SUCH AN...

...INTERESTING...

...FASHION CHOICE. YOU ***CAN*** TRUST ME, GISELLE.

OKAY.

OKAY, I REALLY DO NEED TO TALK TO SOMEBODY ABOUT... EVERYTHING.

BUT YOU SHOULD UNDERSTAND SOMETHING ABOUT ME FIRST.

EVEN THOUGH MY FAMILY'S ALWAYS BEEN ALLIED WITH THE NOUVEAU GUILD, I ***NEVER*** CARED ABOUT MAGIC.

MY SISTER'S THE ONE WHO WANTED THAT. SHE APPLIED HERSELF WHILE I DID... ***OTHER*** THINGS.

GEN WORKED PRETTY MUCH HER ENTIRE LIFE TO GET A CHANCE AT BECOMING GUILD MASTER. AND WHEN SHE FINALLY DID, ***I*** SCREWED UP HER RITE OF ASCENSION.

BECAUSE OF THIS.

I STILL DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT IT IS, BUT IT DREW THE GUILD SPIRITS...

...*ALL* OF THEM...

...INTO ME. THAT'S HOW MY CLOTHES GOT TO BE LIKE THIS, THAT'S WHY I HEAR THEIR VOICES IN MY HEAD.

AND THERE DOESN'T SEEM TO BE ANY WAY OF REMOVING THEM.

MY.

WHAT AN INTRIGUING SYMBOL.

IT HASN'T EVEN BEEN A *DAY* SINCE THIS ALL HAPPENED. IT'S LIKE I'M SUDDENLY LIVING SOMEONE ELSE'S LIFE.

THE MASTERS KIDNAPPED ME AND TOOK ME TO THEIR SANCTUM, THEN I ESCAPED BECAUSE THE SPIRITS HELPED ME, NOW I...

...WAIT.

MY SISTER'S STILL THERE! I HAVE TO DO... SOMETHING...

YOU TRUTHFULLY DON'T STRIKE ME AS BEING IN A CONDITION TO DO MUCH OF ANYTHING.

WHY DON'T YOU LET ME TAKE YOU HOME? YOU CAN COLLECT YOURSELF, *THEN* DECIDE WHAT TO DO.

BUT...

...DO YOU REALLY THINK THAT'S THE RIGHT THING?

OF COURSE.

NICE CAR.

JUST SOMETHING THAT GETS ME WHERE I NEED TO GO.

WE'RE TAKING THE YOUNG LADY HOME, MOMO. SHE'LL TELL YOU THE ADDRESS.

SURE T'ING, BOSS.

ALLOW ME.

THANK YOU. FOR BEING SO KIND.

I ASSURE YOU...

...THE PLEASURE'S MINE.

FNEEP!

DON'T WORRY, CHUBBY, I WON'T FORGET *YOU.*

PLBT

Hmf.

WAKE UP, MY DEAR.

Mmmnn... WHERE'S MY...

...MY *SISTER?* WHERE'S GISELLE?

GONE, OF COURSE.

SHE ESCAPED, BECAUSE OF *YOUR* INTERVENTION.

SHE ESCAPED WITH *OUR* ETERNAL SPIRITS STILL HELD HOSTAGE WITHIN HER.

BUT WE HAVE *YOU,* GENEVIEVE, DON'T WE?

SAVE THAT TONE FOR SOMEBODY WHO'S GOING TO BE INTIMIDATED BY IT.

I'M THE *OLDER* SISTER, REMEMBER?

SUCH AN IMPRESSIVE DISPLAY.

BUT REALLY, YOUR NOUVEAU ABILITIES ARE *NOTHING* COMPARED TO THE COMBINED MIGHT OF SIX GUILDS.

I BELIEVE YOU'LL FIND YOU'RE QUITE TRAPPED.

YOU'VE CAUSED COMPLICATIONS FOR US. WE'VE SEEN TO IT YOU WON'T BE CAUSING MORE.

YOU COULD HAVE BEEN ONE OF US, YOU KNOW. YOU COULD HAVE SHARED IN THE RESPONSIBILITY OF BEING A GUILD MASTER. SHARED IN THE POWER.

BUT YOU CHOSE TO BETRAY US.

THE POWER YOUR SISTER WIELDS IS NOT HERS.

WE ATTEMPTED TO BE...

...PLEASANT...

...IN THIS MATTER.

IT WON'T BE ALLOWED TO CONTINUE.

AT ANY COST.

NO LONGER.

SKAFF

Oh boy!

Oh boy!

Oh boy!

PLIP

PLOP

SCHLEP

GENEVIEVE.

I'M SURE YOUR SISTER AND I WILL GET ALONG JUST FINE.

NO.

NO, DON'T DO THIS...

YOU BETRAYED *US*, GENEVIEVE.

YOU'RE ABOUT TO DO THE SAME TO YOUR SISTER.

YEAH, OKAY...

...SO THE WHOLE TALKING-TO-HERSELF THING WAS PRETTY STRANGE, AND I HAVE NO IDEA ***WHAT*** SHE WAS WEARING. BUT THERE ***WAS*** SOMETHING ABOUT HER, ALPHONSE.

GROWF

ME STOPPING BY LIKE THIS, YOU THINK SHE'LL BE...

...SURPRISED?

NOW WHAT THE HELL'S ***THIS*** FIRST THING IN THE MORNING?

SINSR

I, uh...

...I GUESS YOU HAD A PRETTY LATE NIGHT.

THIERRY?

...BUT SEEMS LIKE YOU'RE BUSY.

Oh.

FOUND YOUR ADDRESS IN THE PARCHMENT PAGES AND I THOUGHT I'D SEE IF YOU WERE OKAY. AND IF YOU MAYBE WANTED TO GO FOR ESPRESSO...

WELL...

...IT'S SWEET OF YOU TO CHECK ON ME. REALLY.

BUT IT *HAS* BEEN A LONG NIGHT, AND I JUST WANT TO GO UPSTAIRS AND COLLAPSE. I HOPE YOU UNDERSTAND THE SITUATION?

YEAH, THE SITUATION'S PRETTY OBVIOUS. SORRY...

...DIDN'T MEAN TO BE A NUISANCE.

SPUTTER-ROOM

FRIEND OF YOURS?

NOT REALLY. I ONLY MET HIM YESTERDAY. HE'S AN ARTIST.

Ah. A BOHEMIAN. SO YOUR DOORMAN ISN'T ON DUTY YET?

NO, CLAUDE'S NOT A FAMOUSLY EARLY RISER, ESPECIALLY WHEN HE'S HAD A DATE WITH A TALL CHARDONNAY. IT'S OKAY, I'LL JUST TAKE THE STAIRS.

NONSENSE. I'VE SEEN YOU THIS FAR, I'D BE TERRIBLY REMISS IF I DIDN'T FINISH THE JOB.

MAY I?

IT'S NOT NECESSARY, BUT IF YOU DON'T MIND...

...SURE.

HAPPY TO BE OF SERVICE.

FLOOR?

Oh, NO... *LOOK AT* THIS PLACE.

I COMPLETELY FORGOT IT WOULD BE SUCH A SHAMBLES.

THERE WAS THIS BIG RED GUY WITH HORNS AND...

...SORRY, THIS'LL JUST TAKE A MINUTE.

psst

Hey, I do NOT like this guy.

SO? WHO ASKED *YOU?*

Um, WOULD YOU EXCUSE ME A MINUTE?

I'VE BEEN DYING TO GET OUT OF THIS... YOU KNOW, THIS *OUTFIT.* I'D LIKE TO GO CHANGE.

I SUSPECT YOU DON'T HAVE TO.

SORRY?

I'M... NOT SURE WHAT YOU MEAN.

FROM WHAT YOU'VE SAID, I SUSPECT YOUR ATTIRE IS ACTUALLY A MAGICAL CONSTRUCT. IT CAN LIKELY BE MAGICALLY *DECONSTRUCTED.*

THIS ALMOST CERTAINLY CONNECTS YOU TO SOME SORT OF POWER SOURCE. SOMETHING *UNLIKE* THE MAGIC COMMON TO CIRESS.

I'M FAIRLY CERTAIN YOU CAN SHED YOUR CLOTHING AT WILL.

ARE *YOU* TRYING TO GET ME OUT OF MY CLOTHES?

NOTHING OF THE KIND.

I'M SAYING THIS MARK ALLOWS YOU TO CHOOSE WHATEVER RAIMENT YOU LIKE. SIMPLY PUT YOUR MIND TO IT.

YOU MEAN...

...JUST *THINK* ABOUT IT?

NO SPELL?

NO INCANTATION?

VERY NICELY DONE...

...AND A LOVELY CHOICE AS WELL.

THANK YOU. I LIKE IT TOO.

TELL ME SOMETHING. WHERE ARE YOU FROM?

NOT FROM AROUND HERE. I'M A ***STRANGER,*** REALLY.

G-FAN

MERLIN

BUT I *AM* FAMILIAR WITH POWER. YOU'RE SOMETHING VERY SPECIAL, GISELLE. SOMETHING *UNPRECEDENTED.*

I COULD TEACH YOU, HELP YOU LEARN TO CONTROL THIS POWER YOU'VE INHERITED...

...IF YOU WOULDN'T MIND HAVING ME UNDERFOOT.

I...

...THINK I'D LIKE THAT.

I DON'T BELIEVE I'VE EVER MET ANYONE LIKE YOU.

NO...

...I DON'T BELIEVE YOU HAVE.

APPARENTLY...

...WE'RE ABOUT TO HAVE A VISITOR.

HELLO, SISTER.

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HOW DOES IT *FEEL,* GENEVIEVE? TO BE ***BETRAYING*** YOUR SISTER.

KEEP YOUR HANDS *OFF* ME!

SUCH VENOM.

YOU SEEM TO FORGET IT'S *WE* WHO HAVE BEEN WRONGED. *WE* WHO HAVE SUFFERED AT THE HANDS OF YOUR SISTER.

THE BATTLE LINES HAVE BEEN DRAWN.

YOU WERE GIVEN YOUR CHANCE, AND YOU SIDED WITH *HER*.

WE REMAIN POWERFUL SORCERERS, MY FELLOW GUILD MASTERS AND I. BUT WE NO LONGER DRAW UPON THE KNOWLEDGE OF OUR ETERNAL SPIRITS.

YOUR SISTER IS A *THORN* TO US. SHE NOW HAS ACCESS TO POWER THAT IS RIGHTFULLY OURS...

...POWER THAT MAKES HER A FORMIDABLE ENEMY.

BUT YOURS IS A FACE SHE TRUSTS...

...ISN'T IT?

GEN?

HOW DID YOU... *GET HERE?* I MEAN...

...HOW DID YOU GET AWAY?

NO THANKS TO YOU.

I HELPED YOU ESCAPE FROM THE MASTERS, BUT WHILE *I* WAS A PRISONER...

...*YOU'VE* BEEN ENTERTAINING GUESTS.

...um, THIS IS DARROW.

DARROW, THIS IS MY SISTER, GENEVIEVE.

GRR

Oh.

Oh, I...

IS IT NOW?

HAVE YOU KNOWN GISELLE VERY LONG?

NO, NOT LONG AT ALL. WE ONLY MET LAST NIGHT...OR MORE TRUTHFULLY, THIS MORNING.

IT'S A PLEASURE TO MEET ***YOU.***

IT SEEMS GISELLE HAD QUITE AN EXPERIENCE YESTERDAY.

YES.

YES, SHE AND I NEED TO ***SPEAK*** ABOUT THAT.

WELL THEN...

...I SUPPOSE I SHOULD LET YOU DO SO. I DON'T WISH TO INTRUDE.

I GUESS... THAT WOULD PROBABLY BE BEST. BUT YOU CAN COME BACK, THOUGH, RIGHT?

CERTAINLY.

VERY NICE TO HAVE MET YOU, GENEVIEVE.

Mmm.

I LOOK FORWARD TO CONTINUING WHERE WE LEFT OFF. UNTIL NEXT TIME.

NEXT TIME. DEFINITELY.

I'M SURE WE'LL BE SEEING ONE ANOTHER QUITE SOON, GISELLE.

WELL YOU COULD'VE BEEN A LITTLE NICER.

I LIKE HIM, IN A HANDSOME STRANGER KIND OF WAY. HE HELPED ME OUT WHEN—

WHERE DID THIS... *THING*... COME FROM?

HE'S A STRAY. I THINK I'M GOING TO NAME HIM SKITTER.

COME ON, YOU, RUN ALONG AND LEAVE MY SISTER ALONE. SHE'S NOT AN ANIMAL PERSON.

BRFL NRFL

YEAH, I KNOW. VERY CUTE.

NOW KNOCK IT OFF, I'LL HAVE TIME TO PLAY WITH YOU LATER.

FRR NRFF?

OKAY, SORRY.
LISTEN, I KNOW I—
Oh, YOU'VE *GOT* TO BE KIDDING.
YOU'RE NOT EVEN *HOUSE-TRAINED?!*
THAT RUG WAS HAND-LOOMED IN THE DERVISH QUARTER!
BLRF
EXCUSE ME.
APPARENTLY **SOMEBODY** HAS TO GO OUTSIDE.
Shame about the rug, but what was I SUPPOSED to do? You weren't paying attention to me otherwise.
We got a problem here.
BLADDER CONTROL.
No, it's your sister. Actually, it's NOT your sister.
FIRST, YOU DIDN'T LIKE THE GUY WHO WAS KIND ENOUGH TO BRING ME HOME, ***NOW*** YOU DON'T LIKE MY SISTER?
SOME PET YOU ARE.
I'm telling you, there's something NOT RIGHT about her.

HEY!

Hey, not outside! You don't understand!

THAT'S BETTER.

GEN, I KNOW THIS IS OVERDUE, BUT I OWE YOU A HUGE THANK-YOU FOR HELPING ME ESCAPE FROM THE SANCTUM...

...ESPECIALLY AFTER THE WAY THINGS HAD BEEN LEFT BETWEEN US.

AND NOW I REALIZE WHAT A *MISTAKE* THAT WAS.

YOU REALIZE IT WAS A... WHAT?

YOU HAVEN'T CHANGED. YOU'RE THE SAME UNGRATEFUL WITCH YOU'VE ALWAYS BEEN.

NOT TO MENTION A THIEF.

YOU STOLE FROM THE MASTERS. YOU STOLE FROM *ME*...

...AND YOU'RE COMING WITH ME TO GIVE IT BACK.

TIME TO PAY THE PRICE FOR YOUR ACTIONS, GISELLE.

GEN, LET GO. PLEASE, YOU'RE HURTING ME...

...PLEASE...

...YOU'RE HURTING ME!

SPLAK

Oh MY...

...GEN?

SORRY...

...GEN'S NOT HERE.

YOU DIDN'T REALLY THINK YOU'D GOTTEN AWAY, DID YOU?

IF YOU *UNDERSTOOD* THE POWER YOU'VE STOLEN, YOU MIGHT ACTUALLY POSE A THREAT.

BUT YOU SLIPPED THROUGH THE GUILD MASTERS' GRASP LAST TIME ONLY BECAUSE OF YOUR SISTER'S INTERVENTION.

SHE'S PAYING FOR *HER* TREACHERY.

YOUR TURN.

MAYBE MY POWER *IS* STOLEN...

...BUT YOU'D BE SURPRISED AT WHAT I UNDERSTAND.

NOW WHAT'VE YOU DONE WITH MY SISTER?!

GREAT. THIS AGAIN.

BLARGH!

OOPS, WORRY ABOUT IT LATER, GISELLE.

HFF!

SKRASSH

Did I *TELL* you? Oh, I *TOLD* you.

But nobody listens to me.

Tastes like chicken.

WOULD YOU *SHUT UP...*

...AND GIVE ME SOME HELP!

What exactly do you expect *ME* to do?

THRUNCH

YOU'RE FAR FROM HELPLESS, GISELLE.

NOW IS WHEN YOU DECIDE TO CHIME IN AGAIN?

...LITTLE FELLAS.

SO HAVEN'T THESE GUYS HAD ENOUGH? I MEAN, LOOK AT THEM, THEY'RE ALL JUST...

UH... RIGHT.

BUT I SEE THE POSSIBILITY INHERENT IN WHAT YOU ARE.

SPLAT

NOW IS WHEN YOU NEED ME.

WHEN YOU NEED ALL OF US.

OOF?

SO WHERE *ARE* THE REST OF YOU? WHY'S EVERYBODY ELSE SO QUIET?

THE OTHER SIX SPIRITS? THEY REMAIN WITHIN YOU, BUT KEEP THEIR SILENCE FOR THE MOMENT.

THEY RESIST WHAT YOU REPRESENT. THEY RESENT THE CHANGE TO WHAT THEY'VE ALWAYS KNOWN.

BOOYAH!

IT'S BECOMING MORE INSTINCTUAL FOR YOU, ISN'T IT? ACCESSING THE POWER WE SPIRITS OFFER?

I...

LOOK OUT!

NOT the place to be!

...I GUESS I DON'T REALLY THINK ABOUT IT.

MY POINT EXACTLY.

THE OTHER SPIRITS MAY NOT LIKE WHAT YOU'RE CAPABLE OF DOING, BUT THEY HAVE NO MEANS TO PREVENT IT.

OW

YOU'RE JUST BEGINNING TO EMBRACE WHAT YOU'VE BECOME.

BY THE WAY, WE'VE NEVER BEEN PROPERLY INTRODUCED. MY NAME IS ALAIN LeCAVALIER.

YEAH, HI. NICE TO BE TALKING TO A GUY WHO'S BEEN DEAD A COUPLE HUNDRED YEARS.

LISTEN, NOT TO BE RUDE...

...BUT WOULD YOU MIND IF WE CHATTED LATER? I'M A LITTLE PREOCCUPIED.

SHLAPP

GET...

SO YOU THINK. BUT AS YOU GRASP MORE OF YOUR POTENTIAL, YOU'LL FIND LESSER CREATURES SUCH AS THESE WILL BE OF NO CONSEQUENCE TO YOU.

BIRRP!

...OFF!

YEEEEEE!

KERRASH

Jazz Rat's

DAMN IT, I ACTUALLY *GO* TO THAT PLACE!

GISELLE, DON'T ALLOW YOURSELF DISTRACTIONS.

YOU HAVE A CHANCE TO BE SOMETHING... UNPRECEDENTED.

I HAVE A CHANCE TO BE *SMOTHERED!*

GROSS.

EVEN I DON'T UNDERSTAND THE FULL NATURE OF YOUR SIGIL.

BUT IT ALLOWS YOU TO CREATE A SYNTHESIS OF ALL THE MAJOR MAGICS OF CIRESS.

IF YOU'RE ABLE TO HARNESS THAT, IT COULD BE...

...SPECTACULAR.

SPLUK

SPLAT

FLUMP

Wuh-oh

MISSED ONE.

Oh NO you don't!

YEEP!

SPLORCH

THANKS.

I HAD NO IDEA YOU WERE SO SAVAGE.

Yeah, well, there's more to me than you suspect. Under this sleek, glossy fur beats the heart of a warrior.

Couldn't let that thing go back to the Guild Masters and squeal on us.

I'M NEVER GOING TO BE FREE OF THEM, AM I? THE GUILD MASTERS.

AND THEY STILL HAVE GENEVIEVE.

Pretty obvious whatcha gotta do, huh?

TAKE IT *TO* THEM INSTEAD OF RUNNING AWAY.

ALAIN? WHAT ABOUT IT?

CAN YOU GET ME INTO THEIR SANCTUM?

YOU CAN RETURN THERE ANY TIME YOU WISH. ALL YOU NEED DO IS WILL IT.

NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT.

YOU COMING?

Wouldn't miss it.

ALL RIGHT THEN, LET'S GET...

...hmmm.

THIS'LL *NEVER* DO, WILL IT?

PERSONAL-HYGIENE TIPS FROM THE ONE WHO PEED ON MY RUG.

THANK YOU *SO* MUCH.

SALE

OKAY, SINCE I DON'T WANT TO OFFEND YOUR DELICATE SENSIBILITIES...

Not to mention you haven't had a shower in, like, two days.

Frankly, you're a little...

...you know, *stinky*.

...AND I *CAN* CHANGE MY CLOTHES TO WHATEVER I WANT...

...LET'S SEE IF I CAN IMPROVE UPON THIS LOOK.

BETTER?

Better.

AT LEAST WHEN I CONFRONT THE MASTERS I WON'T BE FALLING OUT OF MY TOP.

Well...

...we'll see.

SOMEHOW I THINK THAT'S GOING TO BE THE *LEAST* OF MY WORRIES...

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#6

MMMFFH

FEEF?

EEPO!

LOOKS LIKE THE RIGHT PLACE.

Well, that depends.

If the hidden sanctum of the six most powerful sorcerers on the planet, all of whom want you ***DEAD,*** is your idea of "the right place"...

...then, yeah, we're here.

SHUT UP, SKITTER.

You know, I don't remember actually agreeing to that name. How 'bout something a little more virile?

Like Rex.

Or Dirk.

I ***LIKE*** Dirk.

SHUT UP, SKITTER.

THIS CAN'T BE *THAT* EASY, CAN IT?

THE GUILD MASTERS AREN'T EVEN HERE...

...AND THERE'S MY SISTER.

Is it me, or does this seem just a *LITTLE* convenient?

YOU ALWAYS THINK THE WORST.

It always *IS* the worst.

GENEVIEVE? YOU OKAY?

WHERE ARE THE...

...MASTERS...

NOT THE FACE YOU WERE EXPECTING, GISELLE? DID YOU REALLY BELIEVE YOU HAD THE SLIGHTEST NOTION OF WHAT'S IN STORE FOR YOU.

...OF THE WORLD YOU'VE ENTERED? YOU'RE NOTHING MORE THAN A ***THIEF*** WHO'S SNATCHED POWER FROM ITS OWNERS...

..AND YOU HAVE NO TRUE CONCEPTION OF HOW TO USE WHAT YOU'VE STOLEN YOU'VE BEEN ***PLAYING*** AT MAGIC...

..BUT THIS IS DEADLY BUSINESS. YOU FACE ***US*** NOW, NOT OUR SERVANTS...

...AND THIS TIME WE ARE ***PREPARED*** FOR YOU, GISELLE. WE KNOW ***GESTURES*** TO REND YOUR FLESH AND SNAP YOUR BONES LIKE KINDLING..

...***WORDS*** TO RIP THE SOUL FROM YOUR BODY. YOU'VE COME HERE FOR YOUR SISTER

APPARENTLY THEY KNOW I'M HERE.

HLUK

PLUP

GUK

...ALL YOU'LL FIND IS YOUR DEATH!

Yeah, I'm thinking that's a safe bet.

THERE'S A SAYING, RIGHT?

FOOL ME ONCE, SHAME ON YOU.

FOOL ME TWICE, SHAME ON ME.

I WON'T BE FOOLED AGAIN.

COME ON. PRETTY OBVIOUS WHICH WAY THEY WANT ME TO GO.

You're really gonna take them on all by yourself, huh?

ALONE EXCEPT FOR THE SEVEN SPIRITS I'M APPARENTLY STUCK WITH.

WHAT EXACTLY *IS* THIS PLACE?

A PLACE BETWEEN PLACES, GISELLE.

A PLACE OF PURE MAGIC.

THE SANCTUM OF MASTERS IS MORE THAN A PHYSICAL REALM. THE CATACOMB YOU JUST DEPARTED IS MERELY ONE ASPECT.

GO EASY WITH THE METAPHYSICAL STUFF. I'M STILL PRETTY NEW AT THIS.

THERE IS MUCH FOR YOU TO LEARN, GISELLE. BUT THERE'S TIME ENOUGH FOR YOU TO MASTER ALL OF IT.

WE WON'T BE TRAPPED IN THIS VESSEL LONG ENOUGH FOR HER TO MASTER ANYTHING, NOUVEAU.

LACK OF VISION IS WHAT I EXPECT OF YOUR MYOPIC GUILD, MAGUS. AS ALWAYS.

WHY DO YOU REFUSE TO SEE THE OPPORTUNITY SHE REPRESENTS? IN HER, ALL OF OUR STRENGTH IS COMBINED.

I WAS YOUR ALLY BY **NECESSITY** AGAINST THE THREAT WE FACED, ALAIN. I'D NEVER DO SO BY CHOICE, THEN **OR** NOW.

PLAY NICE, BOYS.

I THINK WE'VE ESTABLISHED YOU'RE STUCK WITH ME. AT LEAST 'TIL DEATH DO US PART.

THE NOUVEAU FOOL GIVES HIS AID WILLINGLY...

...BUT DON'T EXPECT THE REST OF US TO COOPERATE WITH YOU AGAINST OUR OWN GUILD MASTERS.

WELL, I DON'T REALLY NEED YOUR COOPERATION, DO I?

I CAN ACCESS YOUR POWER WHETHER ANY OF YOU WANTS ME TO OR NOT.

I JUST WISH THIS WAS OVER WITH.

SO ANYBODY WANT TO TELL ME WHERE THIS EVENTUALLY...

...LEADS...

IT CAN'T BE...

...I'M ON THE *THIRD MOON!*

I ASSURE YOU...

...BEING ON THE MOON IS THE **LEAST** OF YOUR CONCERNS.

WE'VE ALREADY BEEN THROUGH THIS ONCE. I'M NOT INTIMIDATED BY THE SIX OF YOU.

THAT'S MY ***REAL*** SISTER THIS TIME, NOT JUST A DUPLICATE? THERE'S NOT MUCH LEFT OF THE ONE YOU SENT AFTER ME.

I ***DON'T*** WANT A FIGHT. WHAT I WANT IS TO BE LEFT ALONE.

SO JUST GIVE ME MY SISTER.

GIVE US OUR SPIRITS.

YOU KNOW I **CAN'T.**

Okay, here's the plan. You go take care of them...

...I'll go get your sister.

PITY.

YOU'RE...

...WAIT, YOU'RE GOING TO *WHAT?*

YOU?

GREAT, I'M TAKING ORDERS FROM A SQUIT NOW.

LOOK AFTER YOURSELF FIRST, GISELLE. THEN YOU CAN WORRY ABOUT YOUR SISTER'S PREDICAMENT.

WHSH

WHUH?!

YOU SLIPPED AWAY FROM US BEFORE, WOMAN.

NOT THIS TIME.

BELIEVE ME...

SHE'S NOT ATYAAH'S EQUAL, NO MATTER **WHAT** POWER SHE WIELDS.

UHF!

...I'M NOT RUNNING AWAY.

CARE TO ADJUST YOUR OPINION, JINAI?

BE STILL, ALAIN. HAUTEUR DOESN'T BECOME YOU...

...AND THIS IS FAR FROM FINISHED.

WHAT...

...WHAT'S HAPPENING TO THE *GROUND?*

AAAH!

SAND SEDUCERS...

...FAVORED TOOLS OF THE TANTRICS.

SMOTHERED IN SAND OR SPLIT IN HALF, huh?

NEITHER, THANKS.

KRRRSH

UNTHINKABLE.

IMPOSSIBLE!

OKAY, SO TWO DOWN, BUT WHERE ARE...

BOOOM

...THE REST...

KTH

DESPITE WHAT YOU BELIEVE, ALAIN, SHE'LL *NEVER* SURVIVE ALL OF THEM.

WAIT.

THEY TREAT ME LIKE A FOOL, YOU KNOW...

...TELLING *ME* TO STAND GUARD WHILE *THEY* ACT. DIDN'T I ARM MYSELF WITH THE BOOTS OF BARTA AND GAUNTLETS OF GIMMI? THEY'VE NEVER RESPECTED—

A-HA!

OOP.

TRYING TO *SNEAK UP* ON ME!

YOU'RE THE THIEF'S PET, *AREN'T* YOU?

WHY WOULD *ANYONE* PICK SOMETHING AS MANGY AS A *SQUIT* FOR THEIR FAMILIAR?

KHOOM

YIIEEE!

MONDRU?

I HAVE *NO IDEA* WHAT THAT IS...

...BUT THE TIMING WAS RIGHT.

NG!

NOW WHERE DID THAT BURST—

OWF!
YOU'VE DONE WELL...
...BETTER EVEN THAN WE EXPECTED. WE WERE PRUDENT TO ARM OURSELVES WITH ARTIFACTS OF POWER.
BUT YOUR RESISTANCE IS OVER.
THE SEVEN GUILDS HAVE RULED CIRESS FOR CENTURIES. WE'RE NOT ABOUT TO HAVE THAT ENDED BY A SOCIALITE TRAMP.
DO YOU KNOW WHAT THIS BLADE DOES, GISELLE? NO, IN YOUR IGNORANCE OF COURSE YOU DON'T.
IN ADDITION TO OPENING YOUR THROAT, IT RIPS THE SOUL FROM YOU AND ***BANISHES*** IT TO REALMS OF UNSPEAKABLE TORMENT...
...AND WHAT WAS OURS WILL BE ***OURS*** AGAIN.
GISELLE? WHAT ARE YOU... DOING?
I WANT YOU TO **SUFFER.**
MAGUS...

...THE OTHER ONE'S FREE.

HOW COULD—

AH?!

I'LL HAVE YOUR ***SKULL*** FOR A GOBLET, YOU ACCURSED—

SHRAK

KOOM

SHE'S PRETTY RESILIENT.

RUNS IN THE FAMILY.

TELL ME, GISELLE...

...WHAT'S YOUR SISTER'S LIFE WORTH TO YOU?

IS IT WORTH *YOUR* LIFE?

YOURS FOR HERS, GISELLE. SURRENDER YOURSELF AND SHE LIVES. DEFY ME...

...AND I'LL *SACRIFICE* HER HERE AND NOW.

WHEN I GOT DRAGGED INTO ALL THIS I DIDN'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT MAGIC...

...BUT I'M *LEARNING.*

YOU DECEIVED ME...

THANKS FOR THE *LESSON!*

WHAK

YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY ONES WHO CAN MAKE DOUBLES.

HEY, SIS...

...YOU CAME BACK FOR ME. THANKS.

WELL, WHAT'D YOU *THINK* I WAS GOING TO DO?

TRUTHFULLY, IT WASN'T ME THAT... I MEAN, HOW DID YOU GET FREE? I SAW THIS BRIGHT FLASH, BUT...

SOMETHING SENT MONDRU FLYING LIKE A CORK OUT OF A CHAMPAGNE BOTTLE, I'M JUST NOT SURE ***WHAT.***

THE SHACKLES MELTED AWAY WHEN THE LAST OF THE MASTERS FELL. BY THE WAY...

...***MUCH*** BETTER OUTFIT.

YEAH, I THINK SO TOO.

SO... WHAT NOW?

THE MASTERS LIE AT YOUR FEET, GISELLE.

YOU'VE PROVEN YOU'RE MORE THAN THEY ARE... EVEN TO THE OTHER SPIRITS.

*YOU DIDN'T CHOOSE THIS POWER. IT CHOSE **YOU.** NOW YOU CAN CHOOSE TO EMBRACE IT.*

THERE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN MASTERS, GISELLE...

...THERE'S NEVER BEEN A TRUE MYSTIC.

I DON'T KNOW.

I DON'T KNOW IF I'M REALLY READY FOR THIS.

THEN I'LL HELP YOU...

...WITH EVERYTHING. YOU CAN DEPEND ON ME, GISELLE.

IF THIS POWER'S GOING TO BE YOURS, LET'S MAKE SURE YOU USE *IT*, RATHER THAN THE OTHER WAY AROUND.

I DON'T THINK THERE'S A BETTER PLACE TO START THAN SENDING THE MASTERS BACK TO THEIR CATHEDRALS. YOU'VE GOT THEIR SPIRITS...

...YOU MIGHT AS WELL MAKE THEIR SANCTUM YOURS, TOO.

GISELLE?

IT'S OKAY, 'ELLE...

...IT'S OVER.

Squits do tricks for snacks. So does CrossGen's own John Dell. Not only one of the elite inkers in the business, John also knows which end of a pencil to use. John penciled and inked this pastoral scene featuring MYSTIC's Giselle and her trusty sidekick, Skitter, making a new friend. SCION colorist Caesar Rodriguez added the hues.

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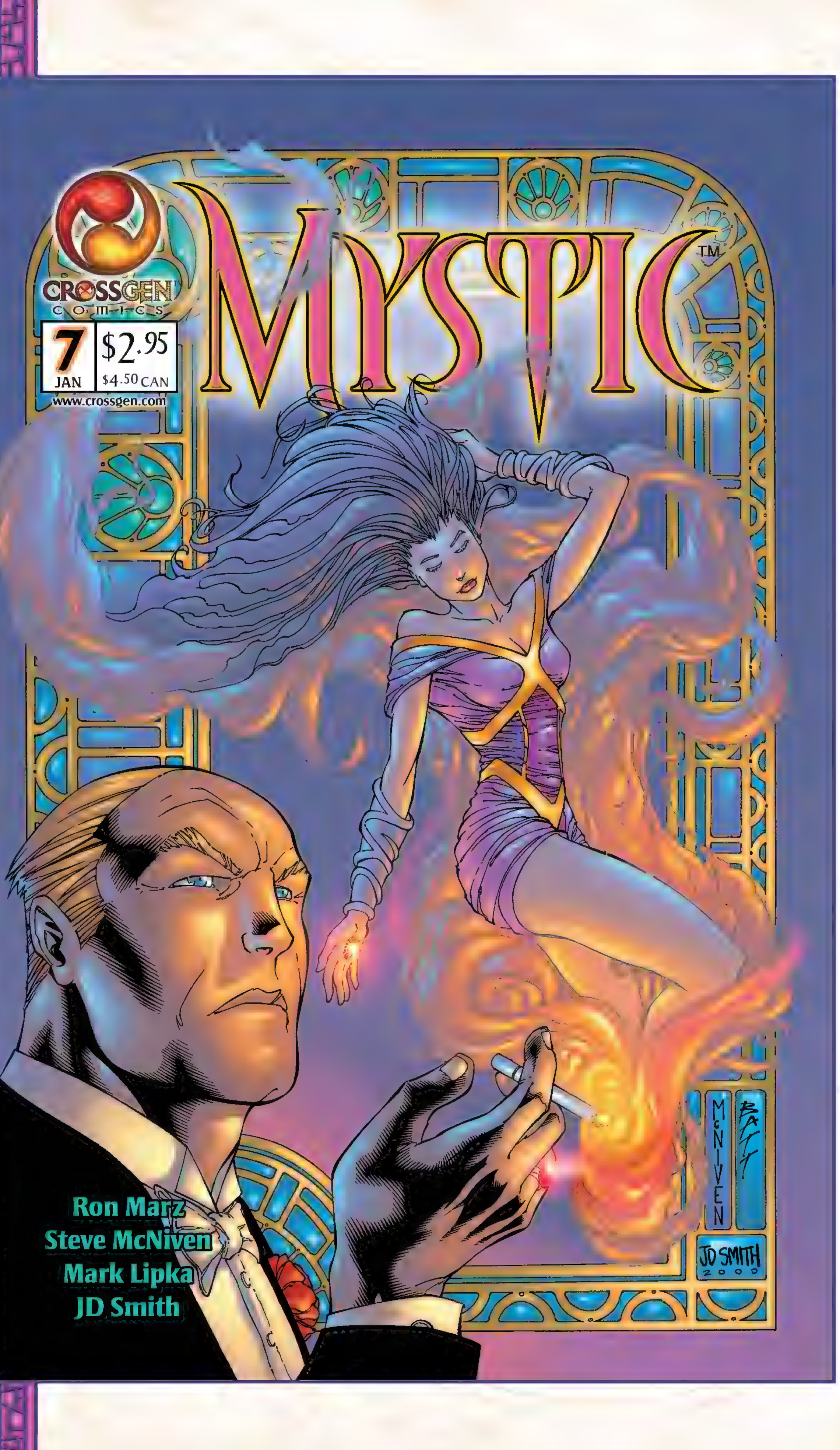


Ron Marz
Steve McNiven
Mark Lipka
JD Smith

APPROACHING SOON
Uh... BOSS?

WHEN THEY GONNA GET HERE, BOSS?

WHEN DO THEY *EVER* GET HERE, MOMO?

FHPP

WHEN THEY'RE DAMN GOOD AND READY.

SO YOU A LITTLE NERVOUS?

WOULD *YOU* BE?

Um... I DUNNO.

PROBABLY.

DEFINITELY.

BUT DON'T YOU WORRY NONE. I GOT YER BACK IF THERE'S A PROBLEM.

YOU ALMOST SOUND AS IF YOU TRULY BELIEVE THAT.

YOU REALLY THINK YOU'RE GONNA BE IN TROUBLE?

WE'LL JUST HAVE TO SEE...

...WON'T WE?

FEELING A LITTLE MORE NORMAL YET?

TINK

NORMAL? YOU REALLY THINK NORMAL IS QUITE THE RIGHT WORD...

TINKATINKA

...CONSIDERING WE'RE HAVING THIS CONVERSATION ON THE MOON? IN THE SANCTUM OF MASTERS?

TINKATINKA

WELL, TRUTHFULLY, IT'S NOT THEIRS ANYMORE, GISELLE.

IT'S YOURS.

YOU'RE NOT MAKING ME FEEL ANY BETTER, GEN.

I'M STILL NOT SURE I EVEN ***WANT*** ANY OF THIS.

CLANK

I HATE TO TELL YOU, BUT THIS AND EVERYTHING THAT GOES WITH IT ARE JUST LIKE THE ETERNAL SPIRITS. THEY'RE YOURS WHETHER YOU WANT THEM OR NOT.

BY THE WAY, LOOKS LIKE YOU'VE GOT SOME TIDYING UP TO DO.

HOUSE CLEANING BESIDES.

SKRASH

LIKE I DON'T HAVE ENOUGH TO WORRY ABOUT.

LOOK, GISELLE, WHAT HAPPENED ***HAPPENED***. I CERTAINLY WOULDN'T HAVE CHOSEN FOR IT TO BE THIS WAY...

Yeep!

...***ESPECIALLY*** MY RITE OF ASCENSION BEING RUINED AND ME NOT BECOMING GUILD MASTER.

HSSSS

Hmf.

AND IF THE TRUTH HAPPENS TO BE THE BIGGEST SECRET IN THE WORLD SO THE MASTERS CAN ACT LIKE NOTHING'S WRONG AND AVOID POLITICAL CHAOS...

...IT'S STILL THE ***TRUTH***.

THOUGH I DON'T IMAGINE THEY'RE GOING TO JUST FORGET BEING BOOTED OUT OF THEIR CLUBHOUSE AND SENT HOME LIKE BRATTY CHILDREN.

SKRINK SKRINK

DON'T PUT ALL THE BLAME FOR *THAT ONE* ON ME. YOU HELPED.

I HELPED...

...BUT YOUR POWER MADE IT POSSIBLE. AT LEAST THAT MIGHT MAKE THE MASTERS THINK TWICE ABOUT CAUSING TROUBLE FOR A LITTLE WHILE.

I CAN'T QUITE BELIEVE THEY'RE GOING TO LEAVE ME ALONE AS LONG AS I'VE GOT THEIR ETERNAL SPIRITS.

THEY'RE QUIET NOW. PROBABLY SULKING.

YOU REALIZE ALL THIS HAS HAPPENED IN ONLY A FEW DAYS, GEN? MY OLD LIFE SEEMS SO FAR AWAY NOW.

SORRY, BUT I DON'T THINK THERE'S ANY GOING BACK, GISELLE.

She's right, you know. Nobody said this was gonna be easy.

THAT THING JUST SPOKE.

WELL.

HANDLING THIS ONE PERSONALLY RATHER THAN SENDING A LACKEY, INGRA? I'M FLATTERED.

WHAT IS IT YOU'RE CALLING YOURSELF HERE?

YES.

DARROW.

STILL ENGAGING IN THAT FILTHY HABIT YOU'VE PICKED UP FROM THESE PEOPLE, I SEE.

DARROW.

YOU KNOW I DON'T APPROVE.

I'M FINE. THANK YOU FOR ASKING.

VERY NICE TO SEE *YOU* AGAIN, TOO.

NOW PLAYING

WHAT'S *THIS* SUPPOSED TO BE?

MERELY A SERVANT.

I'M... ...uh...

...MOMO.

TELL HIM TO REMOVE HIMSELF.

BOSS...?

DO AS SHE SAYS.

Oh. OKAY. THEN I'LL JUST BE, um, OUT HERE. YOU KNOW, IF YOU NEED ME.

KLIK

WHAT ABOUT HIM? DOES HE SPEAK?

ONLY WHEN I TELL HIM TO. *YOU* SHOULD REMEMBER THAT MUCH.

I'M NOT HAPPY WITH YOU.

YOU VERY RARELY WERE, AS I RECALL.

YOU SHOULD ALSO RECALL I FOUND IMPERTINENCE TO BE THE LEAST ATTRACTIVE OF YOUR TRAITS.

IT'S NO MORE BECOMING ***NOW.***

I GAVE YOU A TASK.

GET CLOSE TO THIS WOMAN WHO BEARS THE MARK OF POWER...

...AND SWAY HER TO OUR CAUSE.

THIS IS A DUTY FOR WHICH YOU SHOULD BE INFINITELY SUITED. AND YET YOU'VE ACCOMPLISHED NOTHING.

NOW YOUR FAILURE IS COMPOUNDED BY RECENT EVENTS.

DO YOU RECALL AN ANNOYING WRETCH CALLED KERSPAN?

NOT ONE OF OURS.

NO, NOT ONE OF OURS. BUT ONE OF ***US*** ALL THE SAME.

HE WAS PART OF A HUNTING PARTY. HE ACTUALLY SLEW ONE OF THESE SIGIL-BEARERS...

...BUT THE ACT ITSELF DESTROYED ***HIM.***

DO YOU UNDERSTAND? THEY CAN ***KILL*** US.

THE SIGIL-BEARERS MUST BE UNDER OUR CONTROL, STARTING WITH THIS WOMAN.

ANOTHER FAILURE ON YOUR PART WON'T BE TOLERATED.

GISELLE?

WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?

SQUITS *DON'T* TALK.

THIS ONE *DOES,* ACTUALLY.

Is she like this all the time?

THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE.

AT FIRST I THOUGHT MAYBE HE HAD SOMETHING TO DO WITH ME GETTING AWAY FROM THE ASTRAL MASTER...

...BUT THEN I TOLD MYSELF, "*DON'T BE STUPID, HE'S A* ***SQUIT.***"

TAKE IT EASY, GEN. YOU'RE MAKING HIM NERVOUS.

I FOUND HIM...

...OR HE FOUND *ME...*

...THE NIGHT OF THAT PARTY, RIGHT BEFORE YOUR RITE. AND HE JUST STUCK AROUND.

C'MERE, SKITTER.

I still like Dirk.

HE'S ACTUALLY BEEN PRETTY HELPFUL. EXCEPT FOR CHRISTENING MY RUG.

SO HE JUST HAPPENS TO SHOW UP THE DAY BEFORE YOU GET THAT SIGIL ON YOUR PALM. AND HE ***TALKS.***

YOU DON'T FIND THAT TO BE JUST A ***LITTLE*** BIT OF A COINCIDENCE?

Does seem kind of suspicious, doesn't it?

I JUST...

...YOU KNOW, I JUST FIGURED IT WAS ANOTHER BIT OF WEIRDNESS THAT WENT ALONG WITH THIS MARK. LIKE A SIDE EFFECT.

I STILL DON'T EVEN KNOW MUCH ABOUT THIS THING, EXCEPT THE SPIRITS TOLD ME IT CREATES A SYNTHESIS OF ALL THE MAJOR MAGICS.

I STILL DON'T ***REALLY*** KNOW WHAT IT IS OR WHERE IT CAME FROM.

WHAT? What're you looking at me for?

I'm just a cute, cuddly sidekick with a small bladder.

Uh-huh.

OFF YOU GO.

SO ABOUT ALL WE'RE SURE OF IS THAT YOU'RE SUDDENLY MORE POWERFUL THAN ANY SORCERER ON CIRESS.

IT'S A HUGE RESPONSIBILITY, 'ELLE. AND YOU AND RESPONSIBILITY...

MILD ACQUAINTANCES AT BEST, I KNOW. YOU'VE ALWAYS BEEN A LOT BETTER AT IT THAN ME.

WELL, AT LEAST ONE GOOD THING CAME OUT OF ALL THIS.

I MET SOMEONE.

YOU MET A MAN. THAT'S ***JUST*** WHAT WE NEED.

WHAT'S THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN?

I'M JUST SAYING YOU HAVEN'T HAD THE BEST TRACK RECORD CHOOSING BOYFRIENDS.

Oh REALLY? LIKE *WHO?*

LET'S SEE, WHO HAS IT BEEN LATELY?

THERE WAS *LUC,* WHO AS I RECALL WAS MORE INTERESTED IN GETTING HIS HANDS ON YOUR TRUST FUND THAN ON YOU.

AND *WILLEM,* CONVINCED HE WAS GOING TO BE A FAMOUS COMPOSER DESPITE BEING UTTERLY TONE-DEAF.

AND MOST RECENTLY... LET ME THINK.

HENRI, APPARENTLY PRONE TO MEMORY LAPSES, BECAUSE MENTIONING HIS *WIFE* COMPLETELY SLIPPED HIS—

BUT THIS GUY... THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT HIM.

I'M DRAWN TO HIM MORE THAN ANYONE I'VE EVER MET.

DARROW'S DIFFERENT.

OKAY!

OKAY, SO I'M A LITTLE... ROMANTICALLY CHALLENGED... WHEN IT COMES TO PICKING A WINNER.

YOU USED TO BE ONE OF MY FAVORITES.

WHAT HAPPENED?

YOU FOUND A *NEW* FAVORITE.

YOU COULD HAVE MY FAVOR AGAIN, YOU KNOW. ONCE I WAS QUITE FOND OF YOU.

WE'D LIE TOGETHER IN MY PALACE AND LISTEN TO THE RUMBLE OF THE FALLS, LIKE DISTANT THUNDER. DO YOU REMEMBER THAT?

THINGS ARE CHANGING. OUR HOUSE HAS A CHANCE TO FINALLY ASSERT ITS DOMINANCE.

Oh, I ASSURE YOU, MY ***SOLE*** CONCERN IS MAKING CERTAIN YOU REMAIN FIRMLY IN POWER.

THEN WE AGREE ON ***SOMETHING.***

GIVE THE PAST SOME THOUGHT. ***OUR*** PAST...

...***MY*** PAST. PONDER THOSE WHO HAVE DISAPPOINTED ME.

OR DEFIED ME.

I'D HATE FOR YOU TO SHARE THEIR FATE.

Mm, I'M SURE YOU WOULD.

FAIR WARNING...

...I DON'T INTEND TO HAVE THIS CONVERSATION AGAIN.

Oh, he's different all right.

What kinda name is "Darrow" anyway?

I'm telling you, he ain't what he appears to be. I don't like the guy and I don't trust him.

SHUSH...

Who sniffed out the fake Genevieve? But would you listen to me? Oh no, of course not.

FAKE GENEVIEVE?

LONG STORY.

OKAY, I'LL GIVE YOU THAT ONE. BUT DARROW'S NOT LIKE ANY OF THE OTHERS.

CONSIDERING YOUR PAST HISTORY, DO ME A FAVOR AND BE CAREFUL ANYWAY.

COME ON, THE SOONER WE GET STARTED ON THIS MESS THE BETTER.

CLEAN UP? ***NOW?*** YOU'RE KIDDING, RIGHT?

I FEEL LIKE I NEED TO SLEEP FOR A WEEK AND GET BACK SOME SEMBLANCE OF A NORMAL LIFE BEFORE I CAN FACE ALL THIS AGAIN.

IS THAT TOO MUCH TO ASK?

WELL... NO.

YOU NEVER ***DID*** WANT TO CLEAN UP YOUR ROOM.

YOU'RE RIGHT, WE COULD BOTH USE A BREATHER.

YOU GO TO YOUR FLAT, I'LL GO TO THE CATHEDRAL, AND I'LL COME BY YOUR PLACE AND SEE YOU TOMORROW.

DEAL.

GEN... THANKS, FOR EVERYTHING.

I SAID YOU COULD DEPEND ON ME, I MEANT IT. THAT'S WHAT SISTERS ARE FOR, RIGHT?

Carry me?

OKAY, CHUBBY...

...LET'S GO HOME.

Ooh, hey, speaking of places that need a good cleaning...

DON'T PUSH YOUR LUCK.

Hm.

THAT'S NEW.

I WONDER WHERE IT CAME FROM...

THE RIGHT HAND OF DOOM

...AND WHO SENT IT.

Giselle

That's not from who I *THINK* it's from, is it?

HelLO?

You wanted to sleep for a week, remember? "Get back some semblance of a normal life." Ring any bells?

HE WANTS ME TO COME MEET HIM.

Meet me.

D.

JazzRat's

He's one of the *BAD GUYS!*

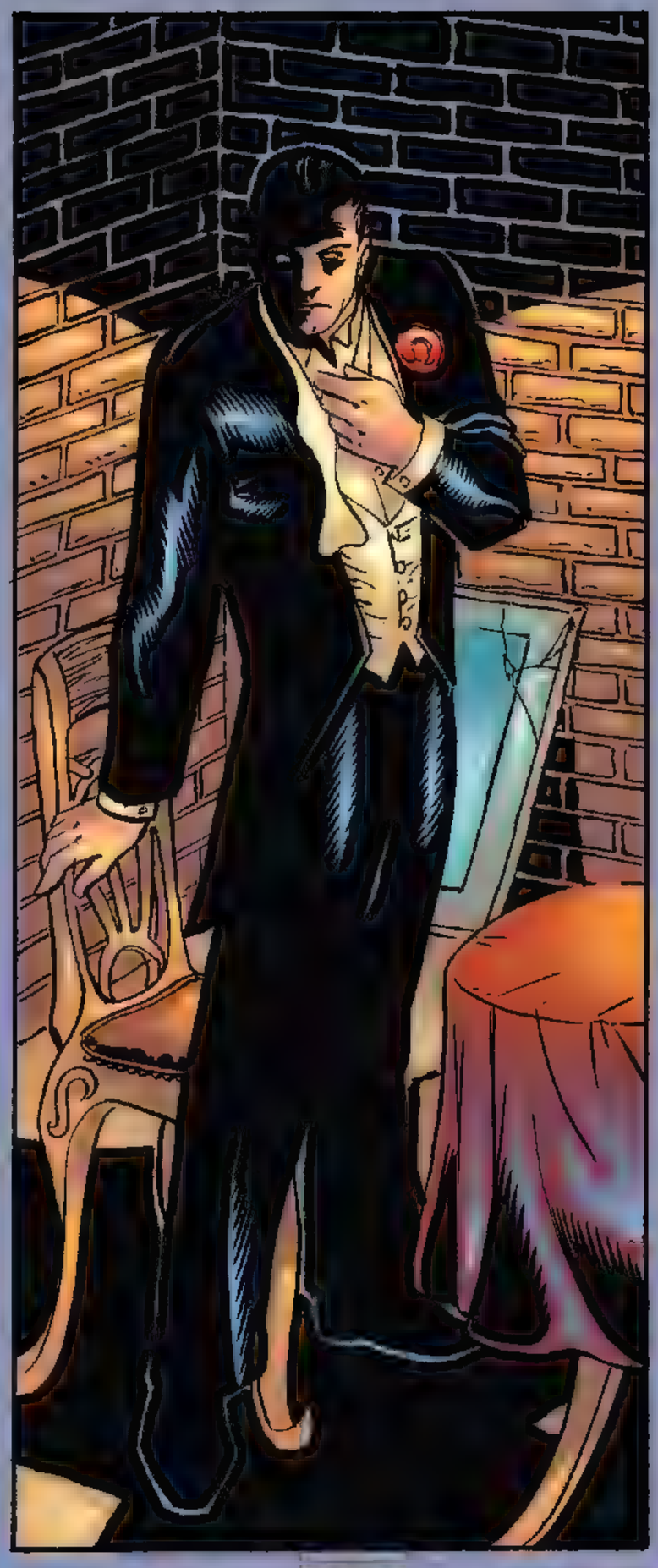
SOMEHOW HE KNEW I LOVE VERMILION ROSES.

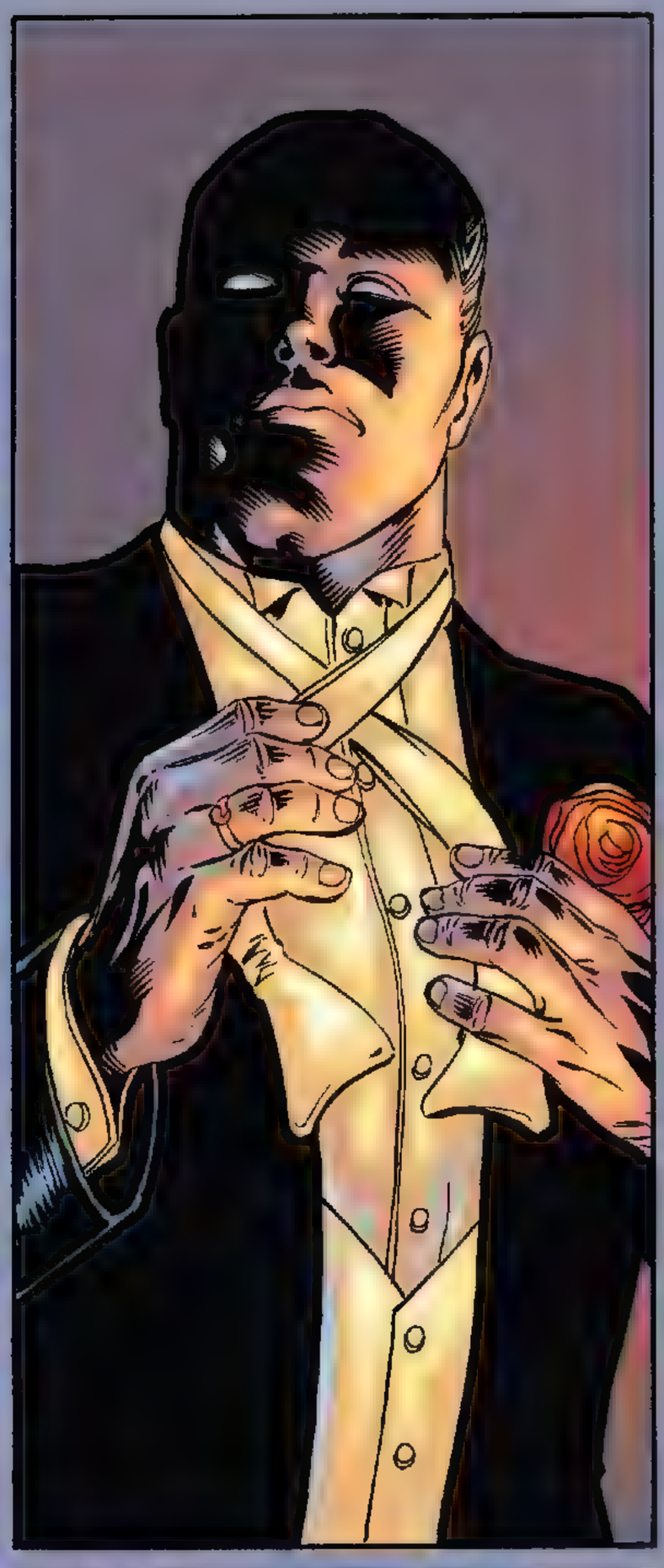
I WONDER WHAT I SHOULD WEAR?

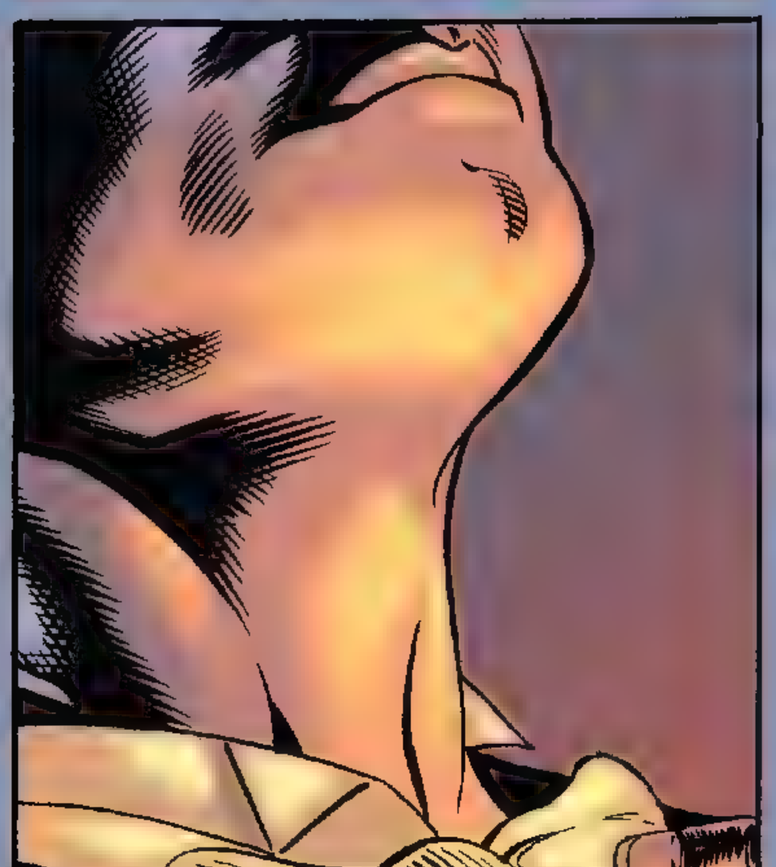
No.

No, no, no. You are *NOT* leaving.

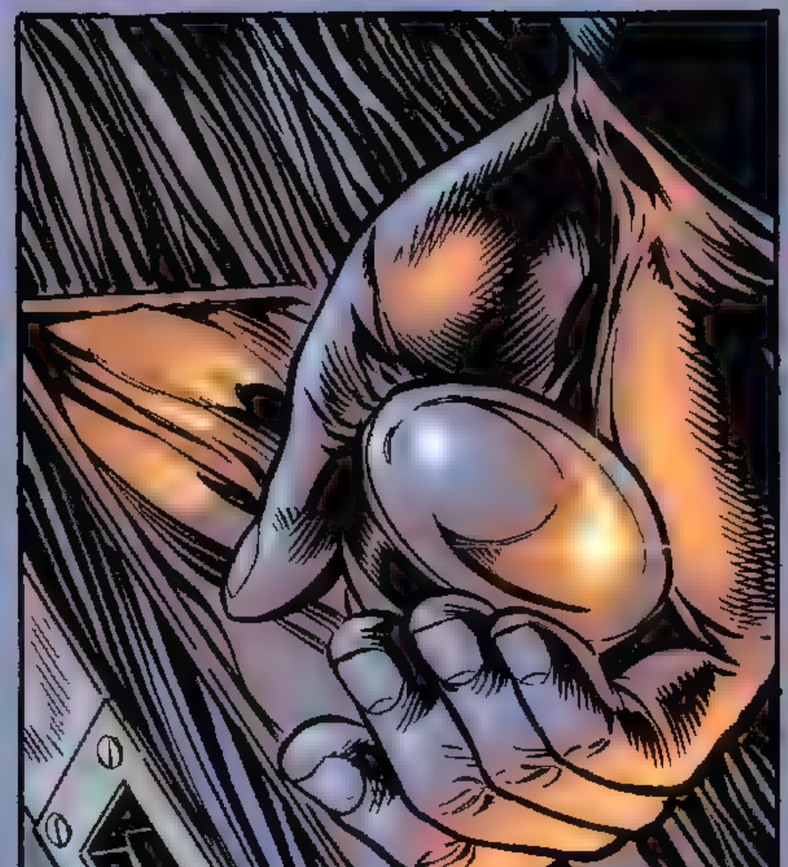
Boy, *THIS* one sure takes a lot of work.

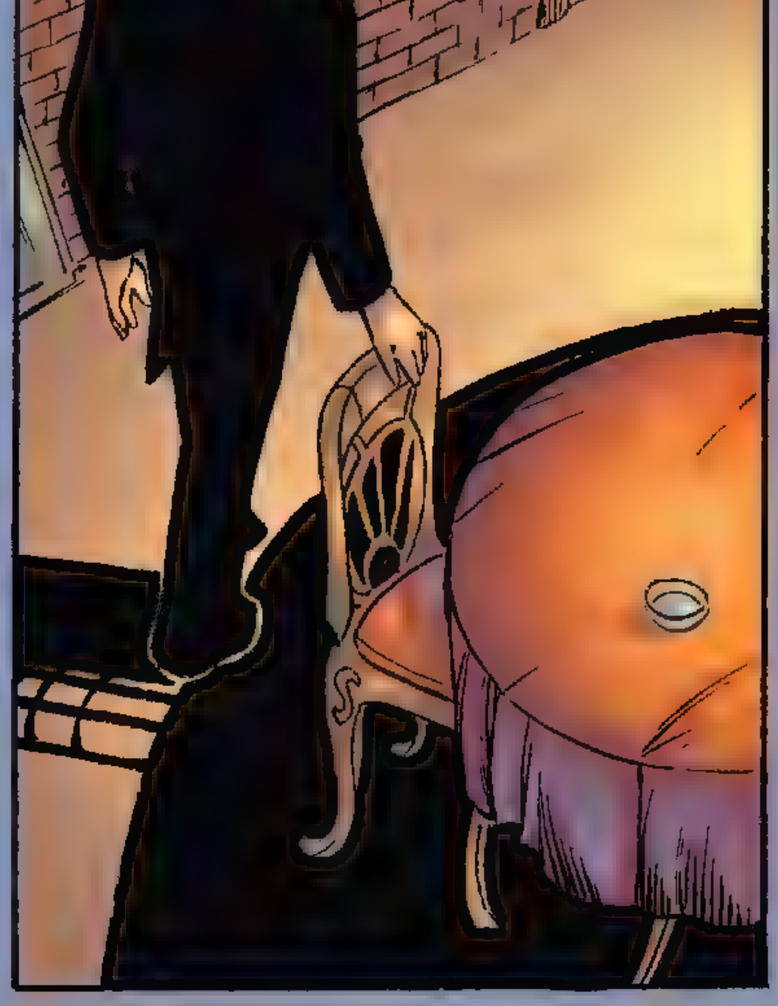






AYING





BOSS?
EVERYTHING OKAY?
EVERYTHING'S FINE...
SO THEY WEREN'T MAD OR NOTHING? I MEAN, BOY, AT FIRST I THOUGHT THERE WAS GONNA BE...
..JUST FINE.
..BOSS?
DID YOUR PARTY EVER ARRIVE, SIR? I DIDN'T SEE ANYONE COME IN.
SIR?

GISELLE...

...I SEE MY NOTE FOUND ITS WAY TO YOU.

THERE YOU ARE.

YOUR NOTE WAS REALLY THE MOST WONDERFUL SURPRISE, ESPECIALLY AFTER...WELL, I HAVE SOME PRETTY UNBELIEVABLE THINGS TO TELL YOU.

THANK YOU FOR THE ROSE. THEY'VE ALWAYS BEEN MY FAVORITE.

AND THIS PLACE, TOO. I COME TO JAZZRAT'S ALL THE TIME.

IT'S LIKE YOU ALREADY KNOW ME.

JUST A LITTLE, PERHAPS...

...BUT I'VE A FEELING WE'RE GOING TO GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER ***MUCH BETTER.***

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ZZZZZZ

WHUH?!

POW

HEY, WAKE UP...

...HE'S COMING.

I'M AWAKE, I'M *AWAKE!*

YOU THINK HE'S IN A FOUL MOOD?

ISN'T HE ALWAYS?

THE ENTIRETY OF THE GUILD WELCOMES YOUR RETURN, MASTER.

I TRUST YOUR JOURNEY WAS ENJOYABLE.

A JOURNEY TO QUELL THE RABBLE IN THE OUTER PROVINCES IS NEVER ENJOYABLE.

BUT I SUSPECT IT WILL BE SOME TIME BEFORE THE PEASANTS CONSIDER RISING UP AGAIN.

IS ALL THAT I WANTED IN READINESS, FIRST ACOLYTE?

YES, THE SCRYING BASIN IS PREPARED AND THE PRELIMINARY DIVINATION HAS BEEN—

GOOD.

THERE WAS PRECIOUS LITTLE TIME BEFORE I WAS CALLED AWAY...

...THERE'S *LESS* NOW.

YES...OF COURSE.

MATTERS HAVE PROCEEDED ACCORDING TO YOUR WISHES IN YOUR ABSENCE, MAGUS.

NEGOTIATIONS ON A CONTRACT EXTENSION WITH GREATER INFERNAL MINIONS SHOULD BE COMPLETED WITHIN THE WEEK.

CONSTRUCTION OF THE CATHEDRAL ANNEX CONTINUES ON SCHEDULE.

AND INDICATIONS ARE THAT THE NOUVEAU GUILD IS READY TO MAKE AN OFFICIAL PRONOUNCEMENT ON THE VILLARD RITE OF ASCENSION DEBACLE.

IT'S OBVIOUSLY TO OUR BENEFIT FOR NOUVEAU TO REMAIN IN A PERCEIVED STATE OF DISARRAY FOR AS LONG AS POSSIBLE.

THE MORE CONFUSION OVER THE DISPOSITION OF THEIR ETERNAL SPIRIT, THE BETTER OUR CHANCES FOR—

LILLA...

...*I* NO LONGER SERVE AS THE VESSEL FOR *OUR* ETERNAL SPIRIT.

WHAT?

NO, THAT'S...

...THAT'S JUST NOT POSSIBLE. THAT CAN'T...

I TELL YOU THIS BECAUSE YOU ARE FIRST ACOLYTE, AND MOST LIKELY TO FOLLOW ME AS MAGUS. BUT IT STAYS WITH *YOU* ALONE.

THE POLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF THE PUBLIC KNOWING I'VE BEEN STRIPPED OF THE ETERNAL SPIRIT...

...THAT *ALL* THE GUILD MASTERS HAVE BEEN STRIPPED OF THEIR SPIRITS...

...WOULD LEAD TO UTTER CHAOS ON CIRESS.

IT'S THE DOING OF VILLARD'S YOUNGER SISTER. AT THE NOUVEAU RITE OF ASCENSION SHE SOMEHOW DREW ALL *SEVEN* SPIRITS INTO HERSELF AND TRAPPED THEM THERE.

WE MASTERS ATTEMPTED TO RETRIEVE THEM, BUT SHE REBUFFED US BY DRAWING UPON THE INHERENT KNOWLEDGE OF THE SPIRITS.

NOW THIS GISELLE VILLARD NOT ONLY MAINTAINS HER GRIP ON THE SPIRITS, SHE'S ALSO TAKEN POSSESSION OF OUR SANCTUM.

BUT I DON'T INTEND TO *ACCEPT* THIS DEFEAT.

IF THE POOLED MIGHT OF SIX GUILD MASTERS IS NOT HER EQUAL...

...I INTEND TO FIND A FORCE THAT *IS*.

SKRAK

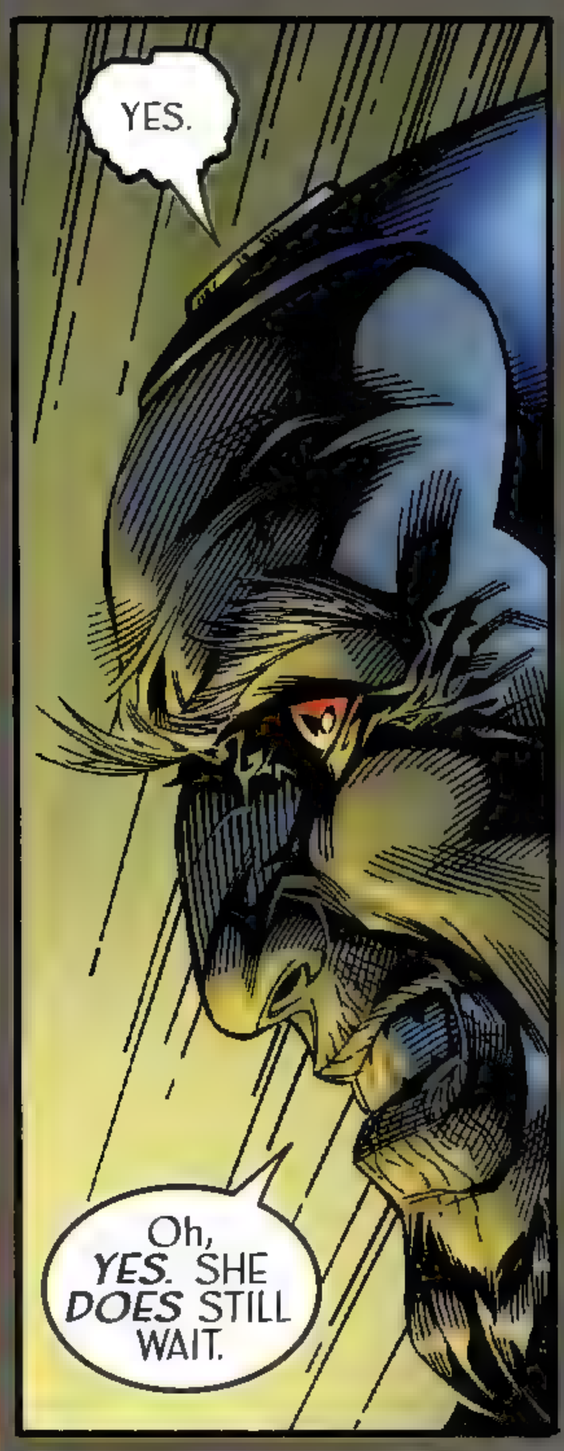
RIP

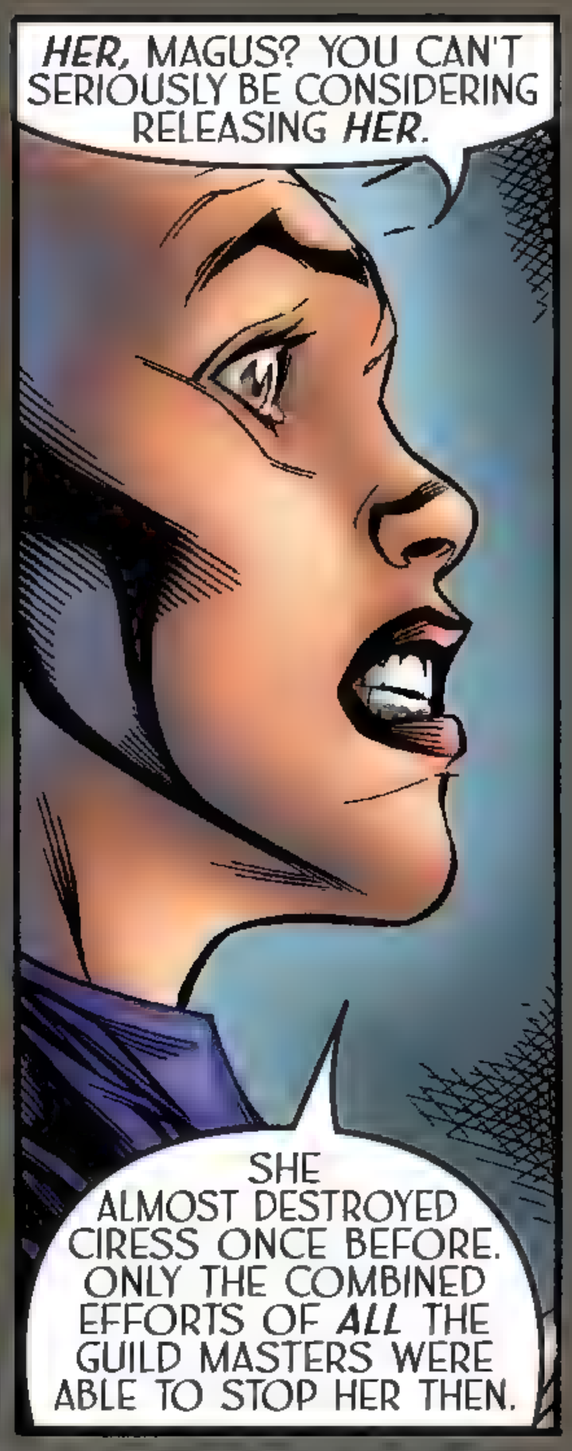
SSSSSSSSS

YUP

PLORD

BOOM


YES.
Oh, YES. SHE DOES STILL WAIT.


HER, MAGUS? YOU CAN'T SERIOUSLY BE CONSIDERING RELEASING HER.
SHE ALMOST DESTROYED CIRESS ONCE BEFORE. ONLY THE COMBINED EFFORTS OF ALL THE GUILD MASTERS WERE ABLE TO STOP HER THEN.

AND SHE WILL SERVE OUR PURPOSES NOW. BECAUSE THERE IS NO OTHER OPTION LEFT TO US.
MADNESS...
...EVEN SPEAKING OF SUCH A THING IS MADNESS.

I DON'T RECALL SOLICITING YOUR OPINION, ACOLYTE.
I RETIRE TO MY PRIVATE CHAMBERS. TELL NO ONE OF THIS.

TERRIBLE BUSINESS, THIS.

I GROW WEARY OF IT ALL.

THEN YOU'D DO WELL TO STAY ***SHUT*** OF IT.

WHO ***ARE*** YOU?! HOW DID YOU ENTER MY—

MY NAME...

...mm, *NO*...

...MY NAME ISN'T ANY OF YOUR CONCERN, REALLY.

THIS INTRUSION IS WORTH YOUR ***LIFE!***

RRR

LISTEN TO ME.

NNAH?!

THERE'S A WOMAN. SHE HAS SOMETHING THAT ONCE BELONGED TO YOU. YOU UNDERSTAND OF WHOM I SPEAK?

YES.

I DON'T WANT HER HARMED. I DON'T WANT HER HARASSED. I DON'T WANT HER ***DISTURBED*** IN ANY WAY.

I HAVE MY ***OWN*** INTEREST IN HER...

...AND I WON'T TOLERATE INTERFERENCE FROM YOU OR ANY OF YOUR FELLOWS. SHOULD YOU CHOOSE TO IGNORE THIS WARNING...

...I ASSURE YOU, THE CONSEQUENCES WILL BE MORE SEVERE THAN YOUR LIMITED MINDS CAN IMAGINE.

I TRUST I'VE MADE MY POINT?

I DON'T INTEND TO HAVE THIS CONVERSATION AGAIN.

FORGIVE MY ABSENCE...

...THERE WAS A MOMENTARY DISTRACTION THAT REQUIRED MY ATTENTION, GISELLE.

I THOUGHT I LOST YOU THERE FOR A MOMENT.

YOU CHANGED.

I THOUGHT SOMETHING A LITTLE LESS ***FORMAL*** MIGHT BE MORE APPROPRIATE.

VERY HANDSOME.

I'M GLAD YOU APPROVE.

I'D NEVER LEAVE THE SIDE OF A WOMAN AS LOVELY AS YOU, ESPECIALLY ON A NIGHT AS LOVELY AS THIS.

I'VE ALWAYS LOVED IT HERE. MY PARENTS WOULD BRING ME AND MY SISTER DOWN TO THE WATER SO WE COULD FEED THE DRULLS AND WATCH THE BOATS COME AND GO.

I GUESS OVER THE YEARS THIS HAS BECOME KIND OF A ROUGH NEIGHBORHOOD.

I'M SURE WE'RE PERFECTLY SAFE.

I'M SO GLAD YOU SENT ME THE NOTE. AFTER EVERYTHING THAT'S HAPPENED, I REALLY NEEDED TO DO SOMETHING THAT'S ***NORMAL***.

I'M SO GLAD YOU DECIDED TO ***ACCEPT*** MY INVITATION.

I TRUST EVERYTHING WORKED OUT WITH YOUR SISTER?

MY... SISTER?

Oh...

Oh, YOU MEAN THAT TIME BACK AT MY APARTMENT. THAT WASN'T MY SISTER, THAT WAS...

...WELL, I'M NOT SURE ***WHAT*** THAT WAS, BUT IT SURE WASN'T GENEVIEVE.

THEN AFTER ***THAT*** I ENDED UP FIGHTING THE MASTERS ON THE MOON, BECAUSE IT TURNS OUT THAT'S WHERE THEIR SANCTUM IS.

OR AT LEAST IT ***WAS*** THEIRS. NOW I'VE GOT THEIR SPIRITS ***AND*** THEIR SANCTUM.

YOU FOUGHT THE GUILD MASTERS? ON THE ***MOON?!***

GISELLE, IF I'D KNOWN I WOULD HAVE COME TO YOUR AID! I WOULD HAVE—

IT'S ALL RIGHT. ***I'M*** ALL RIGHT.

I COULDN'T BEAR FOR ANYTHING TO HAPPEN TO YOU, YOU KNOW.

I ONLY HOPE YOU'LL STILL ALLOW ME TO TEACH YOU.

I TRULY BELIEVE I CAN HELP YOU BETTER UNDERSTAND THIS POWER YOU'VE INHERITED. I CAN HELP YOU BECOME THE ***MYSTIC*** YOU'RE MEANT TO BE.

I'D... *LIKE* TO PUT MYSELF IN YOUR HANDS.

YOU'RE SHIVERING.

ARE YOU COLD?

NO.

HEY, YOUSE TWO...

...APPARENTLY YOU DIDN'T HEARD DIS AIN'T A GOOD PLACE TO BE FREQUENTIN'. DERE'S A STRONG UNDESIRABLE ELEMENT HERE.

STAY BACK, GISELLE, I'LL—

BAP

OOF!

OUTTA DA WAY, DANDY PANTS!

WHEEE!

YOU'RE PACKIN' SOME *VALUABLES,* LADY. AND DEM PEARLS AIN'T BAD NEITHER.

THEY WERE A *GIFT!*

THE NECKLACE, I MEAN...

YOU'VE MADE AN UNFORTUNATE CHOICE OF MARKS, RUFFIANS.

OOCH!

YOW! TAKE IT EASY, LADY, IT'S ONLY *JEWELRY!*

CAREFUL, GISELLE. LET *ME* HANDLE THIS RABBLE.

OOP!

EEP!

THAT'S IT! WE'RE OUTTA HERE!

WAIT! WAIT FOR ME!

ARE YOU ALL RIGHT, MY DEAR? I'M SO SORRY ABOUT YOUR PEARLS.

I BLAME MYSELF FOR THIS. COMING DOWN HERE AT THIS TIME OF NIGHT—

NO, NO, I'M FINE...

C'MON, DICKY, KEEP UP...

HEY, WATCH OUT!

RUMMBLDYRUMBLE

...I THINK WE'RE GONNA GET WHAT'S COMING TO US.

WAS THAT, LIKE, CONVINCING ENOUGH?

Oh, YEAH...

...YOU THREE ARE REGULAR THESPIANS.

THANKS, FELLAS. LITTLE SOMETHING FROM THE BOSS FOR YOU.

ALWAYS A PLEASURE, MOMO.

RUMMBLDY SPUTTERSPUT

NOW WHAT WAS *THAT* ALL ABOUT?

Ah, NOT MY PROBLEM.

COME ON, ALPHONSE, LET'S TAKE A PEEK AND SEE WHAT'S GOING ON OUT THERE. SMUG JERK, PARADING OUT OF JAZZRAT'S WITH GISELLE ON HIS ARM LIKE THAT.

RUFF

BOY, WOULD YOU LISTEN TO *HIM*...

I'M SO RELIEVED YOU WEREN'T HURT. I DON'T THINK YOU REALIZE HOW *IMPORTANT* YOU ARE TO ME.

REALLY, I'M OKAY. BUT IT'S...

...NICE...

...THAT YOU'RE SO CONCERNED.

AY, MISHER...

Huh?

...WUSHYUZ DOIN' HERE?

YII!

WUSHU WAN WIT DAT GIRL? Huhn? WHOOARE YUZ? WHYUZ SPYIN' ON HER?

I'M *NOT* SPYING ON HER...

...OKAY, WELL, YES, I *AM* SPYING ON HER, BUT I'VE GOT A GOOD REASON.

WAIT A MINUTE. WHO ARE *YOU*?

GRRR

WHO'M I? *WHO'M I?!*

TELLZYA WHO'M I! NUNYA, DAT'S WHO!

NUNYA DAM BIDNESS!

YUZ LOOKINA GET DIS SACK UPINSIDE YA HEAD, YA NOSEY! ASKIN' ME WHO'M I...

...WHO'M...

...uh...

...oh, THIS IS RIDICULOUS.

HANG ON A MINUTE.

Melt

I'M GENEVIEVE VILLARD. I'M—

GISELLE'S SISTER, I KNOW. BUT...

...WHY'S SOMEONE WHO'S SUPPOSED TO BE NOUVEAU GUILD MASTER IN A PLACE LIKE THIS?

SORRY, I'M THIERRY CHEVALIER.

I MET YOUR SISTER OUTSIDE THE CATHEDRAL ON THE DAY OF YOUR RITE. I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT HER AND...

...WELL, I WAS CONCERNED, THAT'S ALL.

MAKES TWO OF US.

SO THAT'S WHY YOU'RE SNEAKING AROUND IN AN ALLEY?

LISTEN, MY SISTER'S TRACK RECORD WITH MEN...

...*SPOTTY* WOULD BE A KIND WAY TO PUT IT.

SHE'S GOT AN UNCANNY ABILITY TO PICK OUT THE BIGGEST LOSER IN ANY CROWD.

SO WHEN SHE WAS TALKING ABOUT THIS DARROW GUY SHE MET, I THOUGHT, *HERE WE GO AGAIN*. I SHOULDN'T BE SNOOPING, I KNOW...

...BUT I WENT TO HER PLACE AND FOUND A NOTE INVITING HER TO JAZZRAT'S.

WHEN I GOT THERE, RICK THE BARTENDER TOLD ME SHE'D ALREADY LEFT WITH SOME GUY, HEADED FOR THE WATERFRONT.

ALPHONSE? WHAT IS IT?

GRUFF RUFF

Uh-oh.

IT WAS VERY GALLANT...

...THE WAY YOU DEFENDED ME.

AS LONG AS I'M NEAR, GISELLE, I PROMISE NO HARM WILL COME TO YOU...

...AND ALL YOUR SECRETS WILL BE SAFE.

I DON'T LIKE THE LOOKS OF *THAT.*

Nope.

Me, neither.

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Tantric Guild

ATYAAH
Djinn Guild

BOTHER, BOTHER, BOTHER.

SOMETHING'S COMING, ISN'T IT? SOON, I THINK...

...SOON. I REACH OUT INTO THE PLANES BEYOND AND BRUSH PAST A SHADOW WITHIN SHADOWS.

SOMETHING'S WAITING THERE, CROUCHED IN THE DARKNESS.

SOMETHING *BAD.* BUT WHAT? TO WHAT PURPOSE?

AND WHO WILL DEFEND US AGAINST—?

⇒Ahem⇐

MASTER MONDRU...

...WHO ARE YOU TALKING TO?

MYSELF.

Ah.

OF COURSE.

YOU'VE BROUGHT THE HELM OF HIFFLE, MAJORDOMO?

RIGHT HERE, MASTER.

MASTER, YOU'VE BEEN ACTING...*CURIOUS*... LATELY. MORE SO THAN USUAL, I MEAN. IS ANYTHING WRONG?

WRONG? NOPE, NOTHING WRONG!

EVERYTHING'S ABSOLUTELY NORMAL! NOTHING OUT OF THE ORDINARY WHATSOEVER!

SORRY, NO TIME TO CHAT...

...BUT I MUST DEPART. I'M ALREADY...

LATE...

...AS USUAL. HOW YOU *DO* TEST MY PATIENCE, MONDRU.

YOU'RE A MASTER OF AN ENTIRE GUILD, MONDRU. YOU CAN BEND SPACE AND TIME...

...AND YET PUNCTUALITY IS BEYOND YOU.

SORRY.

I'VE ALREADY OUTLINED MY DESIGN TO THE OTHERS. THEY AGREE WITH WHAT MUST BE DONE.

DESIGN?

WHAT DESIGN, MAGUS?

WE WILL RELEASE ANIMORA. WE WILL SET HER AGAINST THIS GISELLE VILLARD WHO HAS USURPED OUR POWER, AND ANIMORA WILL DESTROY HER.

WE WILL REACQUIRE OUR ETERNAL SPIRITS, AND THE POPULATION WILL NEVER LEARN WHAT TRANSPIRED.

SHE WHO WAITS BEYOND?!

YOU'RE NOT TRULY CONSIDERING SUCH A THING, ARE YOU?

LET ME *FINISH,* FOOL. ONCE ANIMORA HAS SERVED OUR PURPOSES AND OUR SPIRITS HAVE BEEN RETURNED TO US, WE WILL *BETRAY* HER.

WE'LL HAVE THE NECESSARY MIGHT TO *IMPRISON* HER, JUST AS OUR PREDECESSORS DID.

YOU CAN'T SUPPORT HIM IN THIS! DOWN THIS PATH LIES DISASTER!

WE'VE NO OTHER CHOICE. SURELY EVEN *YOU* SEE THAT.

I LIKE IT NO BETTER THAN YOU, MONDRU. BUT THIS IS OUR OPPORTUNITY TO RECLAIM WHAT'S OURS.

IT'S MERELY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE THE LOSS OF OUR SPIRITS BECOMES COMMON KNOWLEDGE.

THE POLITICAL UPHEAVAL THAT WILL FOLLOW COULD DESTROY THE GUILDS, REDUCE CIRESS TO ANARCHY.

MONDRU...

...YOU'VE ***ALWAYS*** BEEN MY FAVORITE. YOU REALLY ***DO*** WANT TO JOIN US, DON'T YOU?

WELL... WHEN YOU PUT IT THAT WAY... VASHUA...

...NO.

NO, NO, NO. I WON'T BE SEDUCED INTO THIS. YOU PROPOSE UNLEASHING A THREAT THAT NEARLY DESTROYED OUR WORLD ONCE.

WE ***WILL*** DO THIS, MONDRU.

WITH OR WITHOUT YOU, WE ***WILL*** DO THIS.

WITHOUT, THEN.

DO WE NEED HIM?

IT TOOK SEVEN GUILD MASTERS TO CHAIN ANIMORA THE FIRST TIME. IT WON'T TAKE SEVEN TO FREE HER.

AND TO IMPRISON HER AGAIN?

WE'LL CERTAINLY RECEIVE NO HELP FROM NOUVEAU. IF ASTRAL WISHES TO GO AGAINST US AS WELL, SO BE IT.

WHEN THE TIME COMES, ANIMORA WON'T EXPECT BETRAYAL. WE FIVE WILL SUFFICE.

WE'RE AGREED?

AGREED.

YES.

YES.

STOP WASTING TIME AND GET TO IT.

THEN WE **BEGIN.**

GRRRF

GOOK GOOK!

Great.

You again.

Look, there's other things I gotta worry about, like making sure my cute little owner doesn't do anything *TOO* stupid...

...and I don't have time to be fooling around with *YOU*. So let's get something straight between us...

RRFF?

YIPE YIPE YIPE!

YADE?

ALPHONSE? WHAT'S GOTTEN INTO YOU?

YOU'RE KIDDING.

TELL ME YOU'RE KIDDING.

THAT'S A *SQUIT!* YOU'RE A *GORK!* YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO CHASE THEM! IT'S THE NATURAL ORDER OF THINGS!

Oh, I'M *SO* ASHAMED.

BRRF

THIERRY, THIS IS THE STRAY GISELLE TOOK IN. HE'S... NOT YOUR AVERAGE SQUIT.

OKAY, I GUESS I DO RECOGNIZE HIM NOW. BUT HOW'D HE GET ALL THE WAY DOWN TO THE WATERFRONT?

THAT'S WHAT I'D LIKE TO KNOW.

WHAT *ARE* YOU DOING HERE, SKITTER?

WELL?

GENEVIEVE? YOU'RE NOT ACTUALLY WAITING FOR AN ANSWER, ARE YOU?

Um...

...no. NO, OF COURSE NOT.

THE SQUIT'S PROBABLY HERE FOR THE SAME REASON WE ARE — LOOKING OUT FOR YOUR SISTER'S WELFARE.

RIGHT. THAT MUST BE IT.

COME ON, LET'S NOT LET THE LOVEBIRDS GET AWAY FROM US.

I'M GOING TO PUT A STOP TO THIS BEFORE IT GOES TOO FAR.

WHAT'S THE MATTER, SQUIT GOT YOUR TONGUE?

Shhh.

Just our little secret, okay?

RISE

YOU'RE A WONDERFULLY INTRIGUING WOMAN, GISELLE.

I'M SO PLEASED I'VE BEEN ABLE TO GET CLOSE TO YOU.

HEY.

HEY, BUDDY...

...I WANT A WORD WITH YOU.

Hm.

THE ARTIST.

WHAT YOU *NEED* IS A LESSON IN MANNERS.

THIERRY?

I DON'T REALLY *KNOW* YOU, BUT I DO KNOW I DON'T *LIKE* YOU.

EXACTLY WHAT ARE YOUR INTENTIONS WITH GISELLE?

MY *INTENTIONS.*

HI, 'ELLE.

GEN? *YOU TOO?* WHY ARE YOU HERE?

MY INTENTIONS ARE NONE OF YOUR CONCERN.

NOW I STRONGLY SUGGEST YOU LEAVE US ALONE.

HEY, I'M ***MAKING*** IT MY CONCERN.

YOU'RE CHECKING UP ON ME. YOU'RE ***SPYING*** ON ME, AREN'T YOU?

YOU KNOW, DARROW, OR WHATEVER YOUR NAME REALLY IS, THERE'S SOMETHING ***NOT RIGHT*** ABOUT YOU.

NOT RIGHT...

GISELLE, I DON'T WANT YOU TO THINK OF IT AS—

CRACK

GAAGH!

...HOW PERCEPTIVE.

THIERRY!

GISELLE.

THIERRY? ARE YOU OKAY? ANSWER ME!

WHY DON'T WE GO SOMEPLACE WE CAN BE ALONE.

BUT...

...BUT MY SISTER AND...

'M ALL RIGHT...

...I THINK...

YOU'RE *SURE?* DON'T TRY TO GET UP TOO QUICKLY.

WE SHOULD *GO*, GISELLE.

Oh.

ALL RIGHT.

DID YOU *SEE* THAT? IT'S LIKE HE'S PULLING HER STRINGS OR SOMETHING.

MY SISTER'S TASTE IN MEN IS PRETTY SUSPECT...

...BUT THIS IS TOO MUCH EVEN FOR *HER*.

MUCH BETTER.

WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE *DOING?!*

WHISKING ME AWAY WITHOUT EVEN *ASKING?!*

GISELLE...

...FORGIVE ME. I DIDN'T MEAN TO BE PRESUMPTUOUS, BUT I FEARED THAT FELLOW WAS STALKING YOU, PERHAPS EVEN INTENDED YOU HARM.

I THOUGHT IT BEST WE REMOVE OURSELVES. TRULY, MY ONLY THOUGHT WAS FOR YOUR SAFETY.

WELL...

...I CAN UNDERSTAND THAT. SORRY TO SNAP AT YOU.

SO WHERE ARE WE?

A *PLACE* I KEEP. IT AFFORDS ME THE PRIVACY I DESIRE.

IT'S LOVELY.

IT SERVES ITS PURPOSE.

MY FAVORITE.

CHAMPAGNE?

GISELLE, I MUST TELL YOU...

...YOU *ALREADY* HAVE IMMENSE ARCANE POWER AT YOUR DISPOSAL...

...BUT YOU COULD BE THAT MUCH ***MORE*** POWERFUL IF YOU TRULY MASTERED IT. IF YOU'D LET ME ***TEACH*** YOU.

TO EXPLORING NEW RELATIONSHIPS.

EXPLORING NEW RELATIONSHIPS.

WHEN CAN WE GET STARTED? TEACHING ME, I MEAN.

tink

"FIN"

RIGHT NOW, IF YOU WISH.

IT'S SIMPLY A MATTER OF HONING WHAT YOU ALREADY POSSESS.

WHEN THOSE RUFFIANS CONFRONTED US, YOU NEARLY DESTROYED AN ENTIRE BUILDING.

I SHOULD WARN YOU...

...I WAS NEVER REALLY VERY GOOD AT SCHOOL.

PERHAPS YOU LACKED THE RIGHT TEACHER.

START WITH WHAT WE KNOW. YOUR POWER STEMS FROM THIS.

THIS *SIGIL*.

FROM WHAT YOU'VE TOLD ME, YOU'RE UNSURE OF ITS ORIGINS, BUT YOU'RE CERTAIN IT'S WHAT DREW THE GUILD SPIRITS INTO YOU.

AND THUS FAR, YOU'VE USED THE SPIRITS' KNOWLEDGE TO WIELD THE VARIOUS GUILD MAGICS, YES?

I BELIEVE WE CAN FUSE WHAT YOU HAVE UTILIZED SEPARATELY INTO A NEW, GREATER WHOLE.

I DON'T THINK THE SPIRITS AGREE ON MUCH OF ANYTHING, AT LEAST WHEN THEY'VE TALKED TO ME...

...THOUGH THEY'VE BEEN PRETTY QUIET SINCE I DEFEATED THE MASTERS AND TOOK OVER THEIR SANCTUM.

WELL THEN...

...IT'S PAST TIME FOR A FACE-TO-FACE MEETING.

HOW DID **SHE** COME TO BE HERE? MUCH LESS BRING ANOTHER WITH HER?

DID YOU THINK SHE **WOULDN'T** COME TO US EVENTUALLY?

GISELLE.

A PLEASURE TO FINALLY MEET YOU IN PERSON. SO TO SPEAK.

YOU MEAN...

...YOU MEAN I'M ACTUALLY...

ON THE SPIRIT PLANE, YES.

I SHOULD INTRODUCE MYSELF PROPERLY—ALAIN LECAVALIER, OF THE NOUVEAU GUILD. AND THE **OTHERS**...

...JINAI OF DJINN...

...HEROTUS OF TANTRIC...

...AUNMAI OF ENCHANTRESS...

...ADAYA OF ASTRAL...

...MAGUS OF DARK MAGI, OF COURSE...

...AND MINDOKA OF SHAMAN.

FOLLOWING YOUR DEFEAT OF THE GATHERED MASTERS, I CONVINCED MY FELLOW SPIRITS TO ACCEPT OUR SITUATION AS IT NOW EXISTS, GISELLE.

WE'RE AT YOUR DISPOSAL, TO WORK IN CONCERT WITH YOU FOR THE GREATER GOOD.

FOR NOW.

OUR KNOWLEDGE, **YOUR** POWER. WE'LL ACCOMPLISH MUCH TOGETHER, GISELLE.

THANKS, I THINK I'LL PROBABLY NEED ALL THE HELP I CAN GET.

YOU'LL HAVE IT.

WE'RE BACK? JUST LIKE THAT?

YOU BROUGHT US BACK, GISELLE. YOU WILLED IT.

I DID, DIDN'T I? I JUST THOUGHT ABOUT IT, AND HERE WE ARE.

THIS IS BECOMING MORE NATURAL FOR ME...THANKS TO YOU.

YOU'RE THE ONE WITH THE GIFT, I'M MERELY THE TUTOR. BUT I DO THINK THIS IS THE START OF A FRUITFUL COLLABORATION.

RIGHT NOW I'M IN THE MOOD FOR LESS TUTORING AND MORE COLLABORATING.

I *DID* SAY I'D LIKE TO PUT MYSELF IN YOUR HANDS...

THE CIRCLE IS BROKEN...

"...THE BEAST WILL BE UNLEASHED!"
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HELLO?

HELLO, IS ANYONE HERE? *DARROW?*

PLEASE, I'M...NOT SURE WHERE I AM.

I DON'T EVEN REMEMBER HOW I GOT HERE. I'M—

AHH?!

WHAT'S HAPPENING?!

LET ME GO!

PLEASE, I DON'T UNDERSTAND ANY OF—

MMPH!

...WH-
WHAT'S...

A
DREAM.

JUST A
DREAM. I'M
OKAY. I'M...

...NNNNN

Hiya.

SKITTER!

YOU SCARED ME TO DEATH!

WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE? HOW DID YOU EVEN *GET* HERE?

What *ELSE* would I be doing here? Checking up on you and the poster boy for handsome strangers with hidden agendas.

SO YOU WERE HERE ALL *NIGHT?* HOW MUCH DID YOU...

Enough.

Enough that I'm even more sure this Darrow guy should have "ulterior motives" stamped across his forehead in big block letters.

But you can't see it at all, can you? Generally I try not to be the interfering type, let you make your own decisions...

...but it's pretty obvious he's got you wrapped around his finger just like that ring of his.

WHY WOULD YOU EVEN SAY THAT? HE'S NEVER BEEN ANYTHING LESS THAN A GENTLEMAN. HE'S HELPING ME LEARN HOW TO HARNESS MY POWER.

I FEEL... GOOD...WHEN I'M WITH HIM.

Yeah, I'll bet you do.

Believe me, I've seen his type before.

He's smooth, I'll give him that. Has he told you you're perfectly safe with him yet?

NO...

...NO, HE HASN'T.

Just wait.

Listen, he's on his way now, I'm outta here. But we've had this talk before. Maybe you should start listening.

GISELLE?

IS EVERYTHING ALL RIGHT? I THOUGHT I HEARD YOU CRY OUT.

I *DID,* BUT...

...I'M FINE NOW, DARROW. I HAD A NIGHTMARE, THAT'S ALL.

NOTHING *TOO* HARROWING, I HOPE.

IT WAS SO STRANGE. I WAS IN THIS PLACE, I DON'T KNOW WHERE, AND SUDDENLY ALL THESE...*TENTACLES,* I GUESS...WERE WRAPPING AROUND ME.

IT WAS LIKE THEY WERE GOING TO SQUEEZE THE LIFE FROM ME. I COULDN'T BREATHE, I COULDN'T EVEN SCREAM.

AND THEN I WOKE UP.

NOT A REACTION TO *ME,* I HOPE.

NO, DON'T BE SILLY.

YOU REALIZE YOU'RE PERFECTLY SAFE HERE WITH ME. YOU *DO* FEEL THAT, DON'T YOU?

I...DO.

OF COURSE I DO. SORRY, I'M STILL FEELING A LITTLE...*WEIRD*... AFTER THE NIGHTMARE.

UNDERSTANDABLE, CERTAINLY.

CAN I HAVE BREAKFAST BROUGHT UP FOR YOU? COFFEE?

OR MAYBE YOU'D LIKE TO RESUME OUR STUDIES. I REALLY BELIEVE WE WERE MAKING EXCELLENT PROGRESS.

WELL...

...TRUTHFULLY...

...I THINK I SHOULD PROBABLY GO SEE MY SISTER. I KNOW WHAT HAPPENED LAST NIGHT WAS JUST A MISUNDERSTANDING, BUT I WANT TO MAKE SURE EVERYTHING'S ALL RIGHT BETWEEN US.

IF THAT'S...

...OKAY?

OF COURSE, GISELLE.

IF THAT'S YOUR PREFERENCE.

I'LL HAVE MOMO BRING THE CAR AROUND WHILE YOU GET READY.

SHE IS UNBOUND!

THE DOOR OF HER PRISON SWINGS WIDE!

ANIMORA BREACHES OUR PLANE IN WHAT WAS *OUR* SANCTUM, BUT THE VILLARD WOMAN'S MACHINATIONS PREVENT US FROM ENTERING IT.

QUICKLY...

...BEFORE SHE DEPARTS OF HER OWN ACCORD...

...WE MUST BRING ANIMORA...

DOOM

...TO US...

WELL.

WHO ARE *YOU* PEOPLE?

WE *WELCOME* YOUR RETURN, GREAT ANIMORA.

WE ARE THE GUILD MASTERS OF CIRESS. IT IS WE WHO HAVE FREED YOU FROM YOUR LONG IMPRISONME—

NNTT!

GUILD MASTERS? *GUILD MASTERS* SEALED ME INTO THE VOID.

WITHOUT *LIGHT.*

WITHOUT *SOUND.*

AND YOU PRESUME TO DEEM YOURSELVES MY SAVIORS?

ALREADY SHE BETRAYS US!

MAGUS!

DON'T, YOU FOOL!

EYAAGH!

GAAAHH

THE REST OF YOU WISH TO *SHARE* HIS PUNISHMENT?

PLEASE...

I THOUGHT NOT.

...WE ARE *NOT* THOSE WHO BANISHED YOU. THOSE WERE OUR PREDECESSORS, CENTURIES AGO. WE ARE...

...DIFFERENT.

WE HELPED BRING AN END TO YOUR LONG EXILE, AND IN RETURN WISH ONLY TO BARGAIN WITH YOU. PLEASE...

...HEAR US OUT...

TELL ME MORE.

WE...

...WE HAVE BEEN STRIPPED OF OUR POWER. OUR ETERNAL SPIRITS...

...THE ESSENCES OF THOSE MASTERS WHO ORIGINALLY BANISHED YOU...

...HAVE BEEN STOLEN FROM US.

THE SPIRITS ARE THE WELL OF KNOWLEDGE FROM WHICH WE DRAW, THE BADGES OF OFFICE BY WHICH WE RULE.

NOW THEY RESIDE WITHIN A MAGICAL NOVICE, A WOMAN CALLED GISELLE VILLARD.

WHEN WE ATTEMPTED TO RECLAIM OUR SPIRITS AND WERE REBUFFED, I SOUGHT OUT AN ANSWER.

YOU.

YOU CAN DESTROY HER, AND WITH HER DESTRUCTION OUR SPIRITS WILL RETURN TO US.

AND?

WHAT IS IT YOU OFFER ***ME?***

OBEDIENCE.

THE GUILDS MUST APPEAR TO RULE CIRESS. BUT WE OFFER OUR LOYALTY TO *YOU*.

WE WILL BE YOUR TOOLS UPON THIS WORLD. FROM THE SHADOWS YOU WILL RULE US, AND THROUGH US YOU WILL RULE CIRESS.

YOU WOULD *GIVE ME* THIS WORLD, THE VERY THING YOUR PREDECESSORS FOUGHT TO KEEP...

...ALL TO PRESERVE THE PRETENSE OF YOUR POSITIONS.

PATHETIC.

BUT VERY WELL. WE HAVE A BARGAIN. YOUR SPIRITS...

...IN EXCHANGE FOR YOUR WORLD.

NOW...

"...WHERE DO I FIND THIS VILLARD WOMAN?"

FINALLY...

...IT'S FINALLY GOING TO HAPPEN.

GEN?

HI.

I THOUGHT THIS WAS PROBABLY THE BEST PLACE TO FIND YOU.

I'M...A LITTLE SURPRISED TO SEE YOU HERE, 'ELLE. YOU'VE NEVER EXACTLY BEEN A FREQUENT VISITOR TO THE CATHEDRAL.

TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH...

...I WASN'T SURE ***WHEN*** I'D SEE YOU AGAIN.

I CAN IMAGINE WHAT YOU MUST THINK, BUT ALL I WAS TRYING TO DO LAST NIGHT WAS LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WELFARE.

JUST LIKE I'VE DONE ALL YOUR LIFE.

I KNOW.

I KNOW YOU WERE ONLY CONCERNED ABOUT ME AND I'M SORRY. I OVERREACTED AND I SHOULDN'T HAVE. YOU THINK WE CAN PUT IT BEHIND US?

SURE.

BYGONES, OKAY?

SOMETHING GOOD ***DID*** COME OUT OF IT, YOU KNOW.

DARROW SHOWED ME I COULD ASCEND TO THE SPIRIT PLANE. I WAS ACTUALLY FACE TO FACE WITH THE GUILD SPIRITS.

GENEVIEVE, I'M PLEASED TO FINALLY MAKE YOUR ACQUAINTANCE ***OFFICIALLY***. I'M SORRY WE GOT OFF ON THE WRONG FOOT...

...BUT I ASSURE YOU, I HAVE ONLY THE BEST IN MIND FOR YOUR SISTER.

BUT MAYBE WE DID GET OFF TO A BAD START. I'M WILLING TO GIVE YOU A CHANCE...

...FOR GISELLE'S SAKE.

THIERRY CHEVALIER'S STILL SMARTING FROM YOUR LITTLE OUTBURST. ***HE'S*** THE ONE WHO DESERVES YOUR APOLOGY.

I'M GLAD YOU CAME, 'ELLE. I HAVE ***NEWS***.

THEY JUST TOLD ME AND I WAS OUT HERE LETTING IT SINK IN.

THEY'RE GOING TO DO IT. THE NOUVEAU COUNCIL OF ELDERS IS GOING TO CONFIRM ME AS GUILD MASTER.

THE CEREMONY IS TO TAKE PLACE IMMEDIATELY. THE GUILD WANTS TO LOOK DECISIVE POLITICALLY, SO THEY'RE NOT EVEN BOTHERING TO INVITE THE OTHER MASTERS.

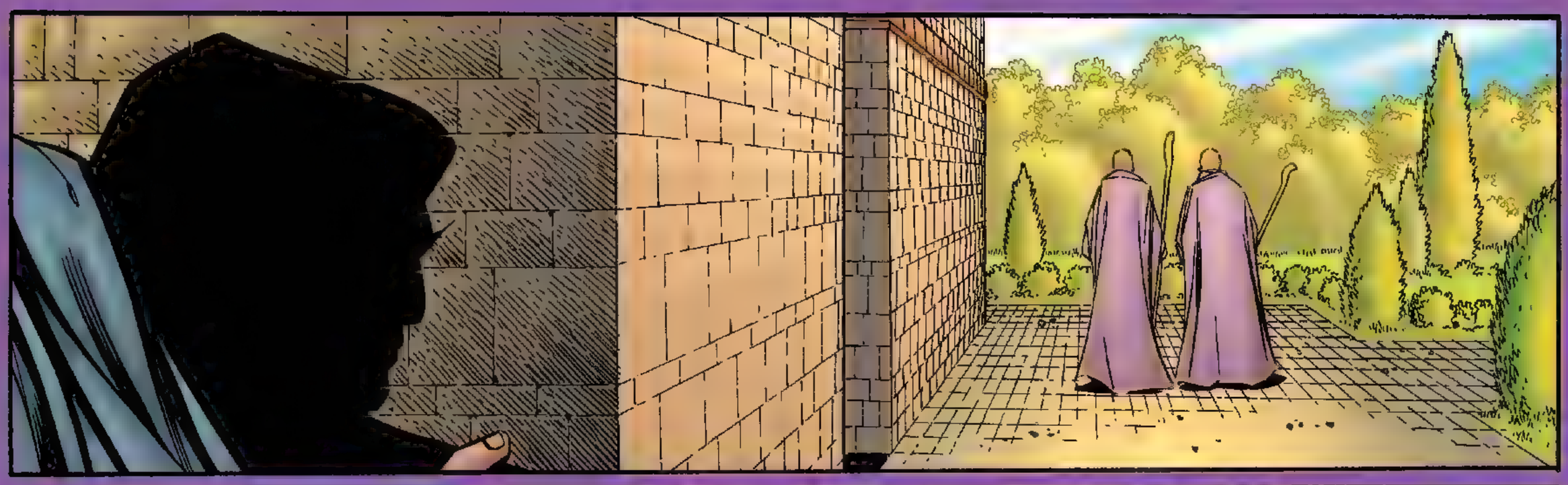
I'VE WORKED FOR THIS EVER SINCE I CAN REMEMBER, 'ELLE. IT'S WHAT I'VE ALWAYS WANTED...

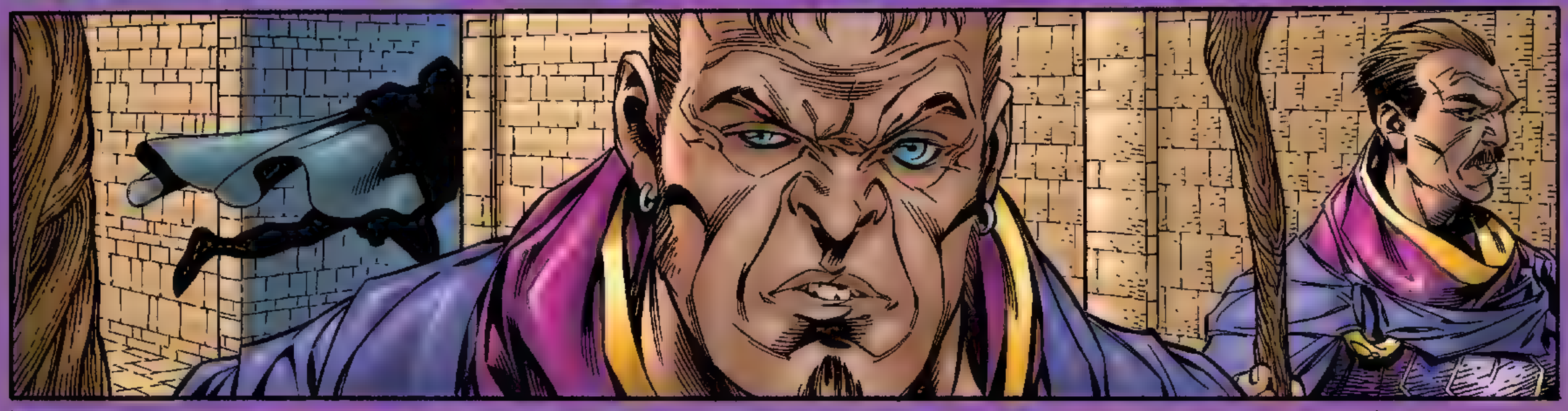
...AND NOW IT'S COMING TRUE.

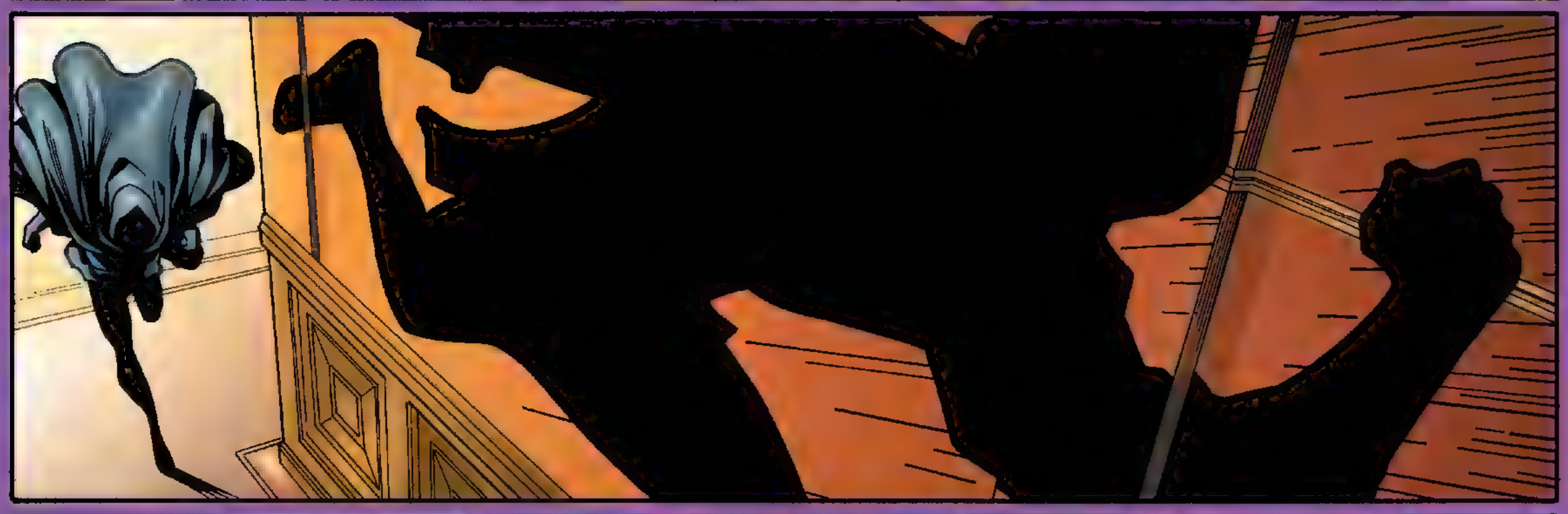
I'M ***SO*** HAPPY FOR YOU, GEN.

I KNOW IT'S BEEN CRAZY SINCE YOUR RITE OF ASCENSION WAS DISRUPTED...

...BUT IT SEEMS LIKE EVERYTHING'S FINALLY FALLING INTO PLACE.







HEY...
...YOU!

NO ONE'S SUPPOSED TO BE IN HERE!

BUT YOU'RE NOT LEAVING ME A CHOICE.

SUMMON MORE GUARDS!

WHF!

Oh, BOTHER...

...I DIDN'T WANT IT TO COME TO THIS.

HE COMMANDS OUR OWN CATHEDRAL AGAINST US!

NH!

PERHAPS I'M NEAR ENOUGH NOW...

...THAT IT WON'T MATTER.

SKRASH

WAIT! I MUST...

IT'S HER.

SHE'S HERE!

'ELLE? ANY IDEA?

NOT A ONE.

OKAY THEN.

SPWOOSH

ANY *PARTICULAR* REASON THE MASTER OF THE ASTRAL GUILD IS SITTING IN A FOUNTAIN?

STALKING *ME*, PROBABLY.

...TALK TO YOU.

MONDRU!

I *AM* HERE FOR YOU, GISELLE...

...THOUGH NOT FOR THE REASONS YOU MIGHT SUSPECT.

I CAME TO THE NOUVEAU CATHEDRAL SEARCHING FOR GENEVIEVE IN HOPES SHE COULD LEAD ME TO YOU, GISELLE.

MY APOLOGIES FOR THE SUBTERFUGE, BUT I DIDN'T DARE INVOKE A SPELL OF TELEPORTATION. RELYING ON MAGIC MIGHT ALLOW THEM TO TRACE ME.

THEM BEING THE OTHER MASTERS.

I'VE BROKEN WITH THEM. I CAME TO WARN YOU OF WHAT THEY'VE SET IN MOTION.

THEIR THIRST FOR VENGEANCE HAS DRIVEN THEM TO MADNESS. THEY SOUGHT A WEAPON POWERFUL ENOUGH TO DESTROY GISELLE AND FREE THE SPIRITS...

...AND THEY FOUND ONE.

THEY RELEASED *ANIMORA.*

YOU...

...YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS.

SHE NEARLY DESTROYED THE ENTIRE PLANET ONCE...

...AND THEY'RE SENDING HER AFTER *ME?*

ANIMORA?

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HEY, BOSS?

LOOKS LIKE THEY'RE GETTING READY TO START.

I'M SURE THEY ARE, MOMO.

I'M SURE THEY'RE ANXIOUS TO GET THIS SPECTACLE UNDERWAY, MAKE A BIG SHOW OF CONFIRMING GENEVIEVE AS NOUVEAU GUILD MASTER.

SO EVERYTHING COMES TO A ***STOP*** WHILE THE GUILD COUNCIL SALVAGES ITS POLITICAL FUTURE BY OFFERING UP A FACADE OF STABILITY.

THEY'RE DESPERATE TO APPEAR DECISIVE AFTER THE PUBLIC DEBACLE OF GENEVIEVE'S RITE OF ASCENSION. AND WHILE THIS PETTY SHAM PLAYS OUT...

...I'M FORCED TO WAIT. ***AGAIN.*** THAT'S WHAT I DESPISE MOST ABOUT DEALING WITH THESE MORTALS.

THE ***WAITING.***

NONE OF THE OTHER GUILD MASTERS ARE EVEN IN ATTENDANCE, SAVE FOR THAT ADDLE-BRAINED SPECIMEN FROM THE ASTRAL GUILD.

AND YET THEY CARRY ON, INVOKING AN ETERNAL SPIRIT THAT'S STILL ***MISSING*** AS FAR AS THE COUNCIL IS CONCERNED. GENEVIEVE'S THE ONLY ONE WHO KNOWS THE TRUTH...

...THAT ***ALL*** THE SPIRITS RESIDE WITHIN GISELLE...

...TRAPPED THERE THANKS TO THE SIGIL SHE BEARS.

IT'S ALMOST DISAPPOINTING HOW EASILY SHE'S BEEN CONTROLLED.

A SLIGHT EXERTION OF MY WILL AND SHE BECOMES INFINITELY PLIABLE. SUCH VAST MAGICAL POWER AT HER DISPOSAL...

...YET SHE'S STILL SUSCEPTIBLE TO HAVING HER EMOTIONS SWAYED.

MORTALS.

WELL...SHE SEEMS NICE ENOUGH. YOU, LIKE, ***LIKE*** HER? AT ALL?

YOU MUST BE JOKING.

MY KIND ***CREATED*** THESE THINGS. YOU EXPECT ME TO ACTUALLY ***CARE*** FOR ONE OF THEM?

Oh.

RIGHT.

BUT SHE'S FALLING FOR ***YOU,*** huh?

OF COURSE.

INGRA'S MANY THINGS, BUT ***A FOOL*** IS NOT AMONG THEM.

SHE CHOSE ME BECAUSE SHE'S WELL AWARE I HAVE A CERTAIN...TALENT...IN THESE MATTERS.

AND I'VE BEEN SUCH A ***LOYAL*** LITTLE SERVANT FOR DEAR INGRA, HAVEN'T I?

EVERYTHING'S GOING ACCORDING TO PLAN. YOU GOT THIS GISELLE PRETTY MUCH RIGHT WHERE YOU WANT HER.

SO WHAT'S BOTHERING YOU, BOSS?

THE ***NEW*** ELEMENT THAT'S BEEN INTRODUCED.

ANIMORA.

I HAD THE SITUATION PERFECTLY UNDER CONTROL UNTIL SHE BECAME EMBROILED IN THIS.

WHAT, SHE CHANGES THINGS?

ANIMORA CHANGES ***EVERYTHING.***

HER REAPPEARANCE IS A COMPLICATION I HADN'T EXPECTED.

COUPLE HUNDRED YEARS AGO ANIMORA WAS, LIKE, ***THIS CLOSE*** TO WIPING OUT THE WHOLE WORLD. THAT'S HOW THE STORY GOES, ANYWAY.

BUT YOU'RE TALKING LIKE YOU KNOW HER.

Oh, YES...

...I KNOW HER.

WE'RE THE ***SAME,*** SHE AND I.

I SUPPOSE NOW WE'RE EVEN ***MORE*** THE SAME.

I AM OF THE FIRST. TO YOU, WE ARE *GODS.*

WE ARE THE *FIRST* BECAUSE WE *WERE* THE FIRST. BEFORE US THERE WAS NOTHING, AND FROM US SPRANG EVERYTHING. TO US, ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE.

OUR HOME... OUR WORLD? OUR CITY?

WHAT DIFFERENCE IS THERE TO THOSE WHO ARE GODS?

...IS *ELYSIA,* CENTER OF ALL THAT IS. THERE, MY KIND FILL THE SKIES. FLOWERS BLOOM IN COLORS THAT WOULD STRIKE THE SIGHT FROM YOUR MUNDANE EYES. THE MEREST TASTE OF THE FRUITS ON WHICH WE DINE WOULD SHATTER YOUR TINY MINDS.

THIS IS THE *PARADISE* FROM WHICH I COME.

A RIFT NOW SEPARATES US INTO TWO GREAT HOUSES BUT ONCE WE WERE ONE

WE ARE SOCIAL CREATURES, CLIMBING AND FALLING WITHIN OUR CIRCLES, PLAYING AT OUR SCHEMES AND INTRIGUES AND ALWAYS AT THE CENTER, PREDOMINANT, WAS ***INGRA***.

WHEN SHE CHOSE ME AS HER LOVER I DIDN'T QUESTION IT. I BASKED IN IT. BECAUSE OF HER, I WAS ELEVATED TO THE ORBIT OF THE FAVORED FEW. I WAS NOTICED, AND MY STANDING ROSE EACH TIME I WAS SEEN AT HER SIDE.

SHE'S CALLED THE SEETHING BEAUTY, PASSIONS CLOSE BENEATH THE SURFACE, QUICK TO LOVE, QUICKER TO ANGER.

WE WOULD LIE TOGETHER IN HER PALACE, SHE AND I, AND TALK OF MYRIAD THINGS WHILE WE LISTENED TO THE RUMBLE OF THE FALLS. SOMETIMES EVEN NOW, IN THE TWILIGHT BETWEEN SLEEP AND WAKEFULNESS, IT SEEMS AS THOUGH I HEAR IT.

FAINT, LIKE A DISTANT MEMORY.

BEING AT INGRA'S SIDE INTRODUCED ME TO OTHERS OF THE ELITE, OTHERS WHO MOVED IN THE INNERMOST CIRCLES OF THE FIRST. AMONG THEM...

...***ANIMORA***.
YOUNG, BY OUR STANDARDS. STRIKINGLY BEAUTIFUL, EVEN BY OUR STANDARDS. AND ASCENDANT.

THE TENSION BETWEEN HER AND INGRA HAD ALWAYS SIMMERED FROM A DISTANCE. THEY CIRCLED ONE ANOTHER LIKE WARY ANIMALS, EACH GAUGING THE OTHER'S STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES.

ANIMORA'S OBVIOUS INTEREST IN ME FANNED THEIR ANIMOSITY. AND I ENJOYED IT. GOD OR NOT, WHAT MAN DOESN'T ENJOY BEING COVETED BY TWO BEAUTIFUL WOMEN?

THE AFFAIR BEGAN AS THEY ALL DO, BY SUBTLE DEGREES. SIDELONG GLANCES LEADING TO LINGERING TOUCHES, CLANDESTINE MEETINGS LEADING TO BETRAYALS OF FLESH.

SHOULD I LIE? SAY I DIDN'T REVEL IN THE DANGEROUS EXCITEMENT OF IT ALL?

I WAS CONVINCED SHE WAS SMITTEN WITH ME, BELIEVED IT WAS ONLY *ME* SHE WANTED.

I SUPPOSE I SHOULD'VE SEEN SHE WAS *USING* ME.

THE HINTS WERE PLAIN ENOUGH.

BUT I BLINDED MYSELF TO THE OBVIOUSNESS OF ANIMORA'S PLOT TO USURP INGRA'S STANDING, REFUSING TO BELIEVE I WAS SIMPLY A MEANS TO AN END.

WE WERE FOUND OUT, OF COURSE. CAUGHT IN THE ACT, I'M EMBARRASSED TO SAY. INGRA'S NETWORK OF INFORMANTS IS WELL-ORGANIZED, A WILLING ARRAY OF THOSE HOPING TO CURRY FAVOR WITH HER. IT'S ONE OF THE REASONS SHE REMAINS SO WELL ENSCONCED IN POWER.

I'M NOT SURE WHAT I FOUND MORE HUMILIATING—BEING CAUGHT OR BEING USED. I'D BEEN NOTHING MORE THAN A PUPPET TO ANIMORA, ALL TOO EAGER TO HAVE MY STRINGS PULLED.

I'VE LONG WONDERED IF *INGRA* HADN'T USED ME AS WELL. DID SHE BRING ME TO HER SIDE SIMPLY TO LURE OUT ANIMORA? WAS I A PAWN TWICE OVER? I STILL DON'T KNOW.

INGRA CHOSE HER BATTLEGROUND CAREFULLY, A PUBLIC CONFRONTATION WHERE SHE COULD PLAY THE WRONGED WOMAN BEFORE A RECEPTIVE AUDIENCE.

THEY WARRED AS *GODS* WAR.

ANIMORA WAS NOT INGRA'S EQUAL. SHE NEVER *HAD* BEEN. INGRA KNEW IT BETTER THAN ANY, AND TOOK FULL ADVANTAGE OF THE OPPORTUNITY TO RID HERSELF OF YET ANOTHER RIVAL.

WHEN ANIMORA WAS NO LONGER ABLE TO DEFEND HERSELF, INGRA HEAPED UPON HER THE PUNISHMENT SHE THOUGHT MOST FITTING.

SHE MADE A BEAST OF ANIMORA, RAVAGING HER BEAUTY, BUT LEAVING HER JUST ENOUGH OF IT TO REMIND HER OF WHAT SHE ONCE WAS. HER SCREAMS...

...HER SCREAMS WERE LIKE NO SOUND I'VE HEARD BEFORE OR SINCE.

I DON'T FOOL MYSELF INTO THINKING ANIMORA WAS PUNISHED FOR HER TRANSGRESSIONS WITH ***ME***.

NO.

INGRA'S VENGEANCE HAD ALL TO DO WITH ANIMORA'S TEMERITY OF CHALLENGING HER.

I WASN'T EVEN AN AFTERTHOUGHT.

WHEN INGRA HAD FINISHED REMAKING HER, SHE ***BANISHED*** ANIMORA, REMOVING HER FROM THE MAGNIFICENCE OF ELYSIA AND MAROONING HER ON ***THIS*** TAWDRY SCRAP OF A WORLD.

TRUE, SOME OF THE FIRST HAVE CHOSEN TO LEAVE ELYSIA, TO WALK IN THE WIDER UNIVERSE. BUT TO THE VAST NUMBER OF US EVEN ***DEATH,*** A THING NEARLY UNKNOWN AMONG MY KIND, IS PREFERABLE TO BEING BARRED FROM PARADISE.

THERE IS NO MORE TERRIBLE FATE TO SUFFER...

...SAVE PERHAPS THE ONE RESERVED FOR ME.

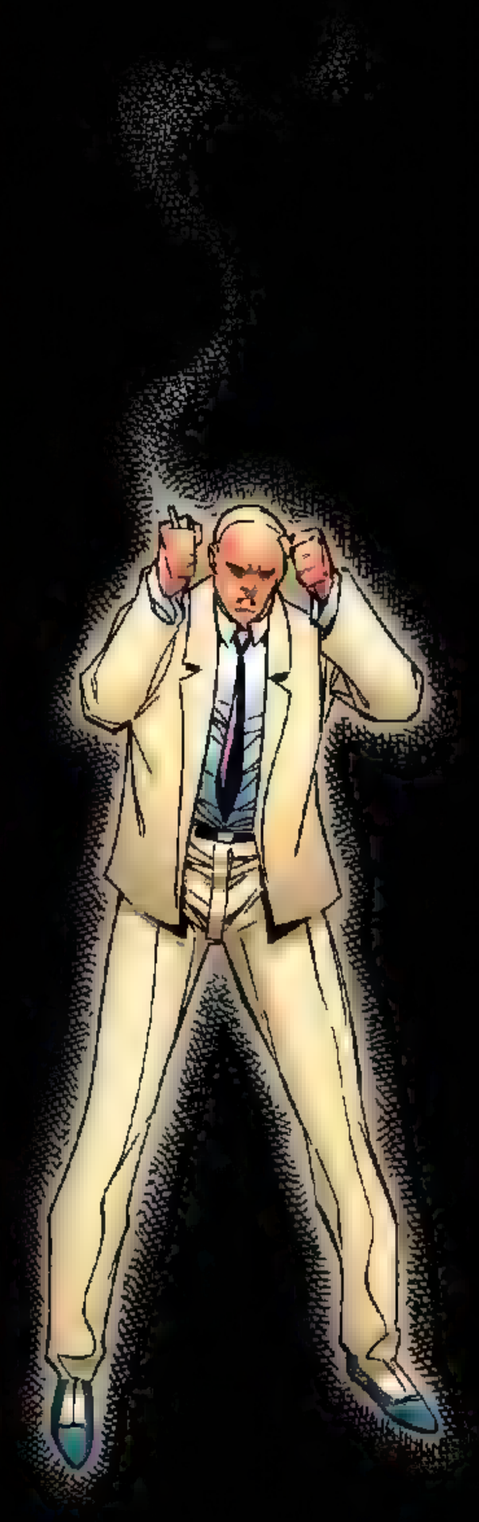
INGRA MADE A SHOW OF FORGIVING ME. I'D BEEN TAKEN IN BY A CLEVER SCHEMER WHO COVETED THE LOFTY POSITION INGRA SO OBVIOUSLY DESERVED. HOW COULD SHE HOLD ME TO BLAME FOR MY NAÏVETÉ, SHE ASKED.

SO SHE FORGAVE THE POOR DUPE WHO'D BEEN SO TRAGICALLY LED ASTRAY. INGRA WAS SEEN AS GRACIOUS AND WISE, WHILE I WAS CAST AS THE HELPLESS FOOL. SHE HAD EVERY MOVE SO CUNNINGLY CHOREOGRAPHED.

EVENTUALLY, WHEN ANIMORA WAS FORGOTTEN AND ATTENTIONS TURNED TO NEW PLOTS AND SCANDALS, INGRA MOVED ON. "WE'VE GROWN APART," SHE TOLD FRIENDS. "SUCH A SHAME, BUT PROBABLY FOR THE BEST."

LITTLE BY LITTLE MY STANDING SLIPPED AWAY. THOSE WHO HAD ONCE WELCOMED ME BEGAN TREATING ME AS AN UNCOMFORTABLE CURIOSITY, THEN AS AN OUTCAST, UNTIL FINALLY ON A WORLD TEEMING WITH MY FELLOWS I WAS UTTERLY

ALONE



AND SO I REMAINED A PARIAH FOR MORE TIME THAN YOUR KIND CAN COUNT.

WHEN IT SUITED HER, OR MORE LIKELY WHEN IT AMUSED HER, INGRA SUMMONED ME. LIKE A QUEEN HOLDING OUT A SCRAP TO A BEGGAR, SHE OFFERED ME THE CHANCE TO REDEEM MYSELF IN HER EYES. IN *EVERYONE'S* EYES.

THE SUDDEN APPEARANCE OF THESE SIGIL-BEARERS WAS AT ONCE WORRISOME AND INTRIGUING. THE OPPORTUNITY THEY PRESENTED — THE OPPORTUNITY TO TIP THE BALANCE OF POWER BETWEEN THE HOUSES — WAS TO BE *MY* OPPORTUNITY.

I WOULD BE A PAWN AGAIN.

WORSE, NO MATTER HOW DISTASTEFUL, I ***KNOWINGLY*** WOULD ALLOW MYSELF TO BE USED THIS TIME.

SHE SAID NOTHING BUT I COULD SEE SHE REVELED IN MY DEBASEMENT.

SO I CAME TO CIRESS WITH EVERY INTENTION OF BEING A PERFECT LACKEY AND BRINGING GISELLE UNDER HOUSE SINISTER INFLUENCE.

NOT A TERRIBLY DIFFICULT TASK FOR A GOD.

I WAS TO BE BACK IN THE GOOD GRACES OF THE SINISTER HIERARCHY ONCE MY TASK WAS ACCOMPLISHED.

AND NOW THIS.

MAYBE I'M NOT THE SMARTEST GUY IN THE WORLD...

...WELL, I'M *DEFINITELY* NOT THE SMARTEST GUY IN THE WORLD...

...BUT IT DON'T SEEM LIKE ANIMORA'S SOMEBODY TO BE FOOLING AROUND WITH. TOOK ALL THE GUILD MASTERS TO LOCK HER UP THE FIRST TIME, NOW THIS BUNCH WENT AND RELEASED HER.

I WAS *THEM,* I'D BE WORRIED ABOUT BEING ABLE TO KEEP HER ON A SHORT LEASH.

UPON ELYSIA SHE WAS AMONG THE MORE POWERFUL OF US. HERE...

...THEY HAVE NO HOPE OF CONTROLLING HER. NONE AT ALL.

IT'S OBVIOUS WHAT THE MASTERS WANT. BUT WHAT IS IT ANIMORA WANTS?

YOU'RE NOT THINKING OF DOING SOMETHING...

...UNPLANNED...

...ARE YOU, BOSS?

I DON'T KNOW *WHAT* I'M THINKING.

THIS REALLY SHOULDN'T COME AS A SURPRISE TO ME, SHOULD IT? ONCE AGAIN I'M CAUGHT BETWEEN WOMEN.

THREE OF THEM THIS TIME.

HEY, BOSS?

LOOKS LIKE THEY'RE GETTING TO THE END OF IT DOWN THERE.

AS IF I NEEDED ANOTHER WRINKLE...

"...THE SISTER FINALLY TAKES HER PLACE AS MASTER OF THE NOUVEAU GUILD.

"GENEVIEVE DOESN'T TRUST ME. THAT MUCH IS PAINFULLY OBVIOUS DESPITE THE HAND SHE EXTENDED TO ME.

"AND NOW SHE HAS THE RESOURCES OF AN ENTIRE GUILD AT HER DISPOSAL.

"IT'S NOT UNTHINKABLE SHE COULD BECOME AN IMPEDIMENT TO MY CONTROL OF GISELLE...

"...AND THE SIGIL...

"...BUT CERTAINLY NOTHING INSURMOUNTABLE.

"IF NEED BE I CAN EASILY TURN THEM AGAINST ONE ANOTHER.

"I BELIEVE WE'LL HAVE TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT GISELLE'S MANGY PET, THOUGH..."

...I DON'T LIKE THE WAY IT *LOOKS* AT ME.

SO WHAT'RE YOU GONNA DO?

GO OFFER MY CONGRATULATIONS, OF COURSE. PERISH THE THOUGHT THAT I SHOULD APPEAR RUDE.

NO, NO, I MEAN *AFTER* THAT. WHAT ARE YOU GONNA *DO?*

I WANT YOU TO KNOW, BOSS, WHATEVER IT IS, I'M YOUR GUY. YOU PICKED ME UP OUTTA THE GUTTER, KEPT THE WEREWOLVES FROM MY DOOR.

I'M LOYAL TO YOU...

...NO MATTER WHAT.

WHY, MOMO, I'M *TOUCHED* BY YOUR SENTIMENT. LOYALTY'S SUCH A *RARE* COMMODITY THESE DAYS.

COME ALONG, TIME TO GET THIS OVER WITH.

FHP

I'VE HEARD IT SAID IT'S BETTER TO RULE IN EXILE THAN SERVE IN PARADISE.

DO YOU THINK THAT'S TRUE...

...EVEN IF YOU PLAN ON *CONQUERING* PARADISE?

MYSTIC

Dear Gina,

Well, it's finally happened.

I've fallen in love with a comic book character. The looks, the power, the bod – can you blame me? Every night, I dream of being swept into the arms of my all-time favorite character, my most perfect fantasy: that's right, Magus of the Dark Magi Guild. He's totally awesome, seriously.

It started innocently enough. There I was, happily reading MYSTIC #1 and being introduced to the Villard sisters and the planet Ciress, and suddenly, I turned the page and first laid eyes on my beloved Magus. It was like an electric shock. The jug ears, the wrinkled sickly flesh, the undoubtedly rotten breath… 'Tis to swoon! Oh, cruel, cruel CrossGen, to create such a shriveled hottie to tease us with!

Oh, sure, my parents don't approve. They think I should fall in love with a "real" guy. And sometimes, even my friends can be really mean. They're all like, "Ew, Debbie! What's with all the pictures of the old geek on your wall?" or "Gross, Debbie… Why did you write 'Mrs. Debbie Rose Magus' all over your Pee-Chee?" and I'm like, "Shut up!" and they're like, "YOU shut up! He's sick!" and I'm like, "Nuh-uh!"

They're so immature. They can't understand my secret love for Magus. And the boys at my school are all such jerks. Oh, why can't they have long fingernails and bad teeth like my hunky, wicked sorcerer? How I long to kiss that mummified face!

I guess you can tell I'm really into him. So, I'm starting a letter writing campaign for Magus to get his own series–or at least a swimsuit special. You could call it the "Magus Loves Debbie Swimsuit Special." I know at least one guaranteed sale!

Debbie
President of The Magus Boosters Club

Hey, Debbie, thanks for the letter, and thanks for all the fan art – it was, um, interesting. Well, "interesting" isn't quite the word for it. "Disturbing," maybe. If you're going to send more drawings, the guys in the quads have asked if you'd please consider leaving Magus' robe on. Brandon has locked himself in the broom closet and won't come out, poor sensitive thing. He just keeps saying, "I saw it. I saw it," over and over again.

❖

Dear MYSTIC,

I was wondering if you were lactose intolerant. You're real pretty. Do you think that, even if you personally aren't lactose intolerant, that you could ever go out with a guy who was lactose intolerant? I'm not picky. I'd go out with you even if you had a "normal" threshold for milk and milk products. I hope you're not one of those stuck-up girls who is afraid to be seen on the street with someone who is lactose intolerant.

Ted Yarbrough
Can't drink milk

What is it with the letters this month? Ted, Mystic is a fictional character, so she obviously can't go out with you or anyone else. However, our four-color Giselle is a sweet, caring woman who is learning (sometimes the hard way) that outward appearances aren't what are most important in judging a person. She's growing, in other words, into someone who looks beyond such things and into a person's heart, because that's where their true value lies.

But she still wouldn't go out with someone who was lactose intolerant. That'd be too weird.

❖

Dear Gina,

I thought you might like to print a list of the names I considered for Giselle's loyal and oh-so-adorable friend before finally settling on Skitter the Squit:

Toodle, the Wampwort
Frito, the Slippydoo
Pimple, the Giggle-rat
Puddles, the Poochitty-poo
Bongo, the Cutiekins
Diggles, the Dollywags
Darling, the Bunnybear

And the one that almost made it:

Quackers, the Sweetie-hound

Ron Marz
via a paper airplane loop-de-loop

Ron, you can write and write, and I'm still not giving you Giselle's high heels. Why don't you just go BUY some, for crying out loud? Men, honestly!

NEXT ISSUE: **In a startling turn of events, Giselle spends the entire issue dressed in a bulky down parka, with a long overcoat and snow boots. And no, you can't have those either, Ron!**

via snail mail:
CrossGeneration Comics, Inc.
4023 Tampa Road, Suite 2400
Oldsmar, Florida 34677

or via e-mail:
letters@crossgen.com
MYSTIC (in the subject line)

PLEASE LET US KNOW IF YOU DON'T WANT US TO PRINT YOUR NAME AND ADDRESS. ALSO, WHEN SENDING SHOES TO RON MARZ, IF YOU WISH THEM RETURNED, INCLUDE A STAMPED, SELF-ADDRESSED PACKAGE. NO CLEATS, PLEASE.

Mystic #11 "April Fool's" fake letters page by **Gail Simone**

SKUTCH

SKUTCH

SKLUTCH

SLITCH

RRRAARGH

SHRUP

SHLKK

HHHRRRRRRRRR

HRFF

NICE.

AND I'M SURE YOU'RE SUCH *GOOD BOYS*, TOO.

EAGER TO **PLEASE.**

I WANT YOU TO DO SOMETHING FOR ME. A VERY IMPORTANT SOMETHING.

I'M GOING TO SEND YOU TO SEE A WOMAN NAMED GISELLE.

YOU'LL LIKE HER. THEY TELL ME SHE'S A PRETTY ONE.

ONCE YOU'RE CLOSE ENOUGH, I WANT YOU TO...

...WELL, YOU'LL JUST DO WHAT YOU DO, WON'T YOU?

I THINK WE UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER.

NOW *FETCH.*

ANIMORA?

THE VILLARD WOMAN COMMANDS A GREAT DEAL OF MAGICAL POWER.

WE THOUGHT...

...WE *ASSUMED*...

...THAT WHEN WE STRUCK OUR BARGAIN YOU WOULD DISPOSE OF HER *YOURSELF*, NOT SEND YOUR MINIONS.

I *WILL* DISPOSE OF HER...

...IN MY OWN TIME.

FIRST SHE'S TO BE TESTED, HER STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES DETERMINED. SO I SENT MY PETS TO HER.

I DON'T *EXPECT* THEM TO DESTROY HER, THOUGH IF THEY MANAGE TO DO SO, THEN SO MUCH THE BETTER.

I *TRUST* THAT'S NOT A DIFFICULTY?

NO...

...NO, OF COURSE NOT.

MY FELLOW MASTERS AND I ARE CONCERNED ONLY WITH HER DEMISE AND THE RETURN OF OUR RIGHTFUL SPIRITS.

PATIENCE.

I WAS EXILED FROM PARADISE BY A RIVAL I UNDERESTIMATED. THEN YOUR PREDECESSORS IMPRISONED ME IN AN UTTER VOID. EACH TIME I WAITED AND GATHERED MY STRENGTH.

EACH TIME I WAS PATIENT UNTIL MY MOMENT CAME.

I'M WELL AWARE OF WHAT MUST BE DONE.

MAGUS...

...IT'S TIME WE ADMIT THE ERROR WE'VE MADE. WE'VE UNLEASHED A CREATURE WE CAN'T CONTROL.

WE STAND IN YOUR PLACE OF POWER, ***YOUR*** GUILD CATHEDRAL, AND SHE DOESN'T EVEN BOTHER TO HIDE THE CONTEMPT SHE FEELS FOR US.

WHAT'S DONE IS DONE, ZAI.

WE PURSUED OUR ONLY OPTION FOR BRINGING ABOUT THE THIEF'S DESTRUCTION. THIS IS THE PRICE WE PAY FOR FREEING OUR SPIRITS.

WE AGREED TO THIS.

ALL OF US.

BECAUSE *YOU* ASSURED US WE COULD AGAIN IMPRISON HER ONCE SHE'D SERVED OUR PURPOSES! DO YOU REALLY BELIEVE THAT'S POSSIBLE NOW?

I'D EXPECT AS MUCH FROM SOMEONE ANIMORA BESTED SO READILY UPON HER ARRIVAL.

YOUR WOUNDED PRIDE IS SHOWING, ATYAAH.

MY PRIDE IS *BESIDE* THE POINT. IT'S OBVIOUS NONE OF US CAN STAND AGAINST HER.

MONDRU DID WARN US. WE TREAT HIM AS A FOOL, BUT PERHAPS THIS TIME HE WAS—

ENOUGH!

IT'S FAR TOO LATE TO LOSE YOUR STOMACHS NOW! WE'VE STARTED DOWN THIS PATH, WE'LL SEE IT THROUGH TO ITS END!

I PROMISE YOU, WHEN THIS AFFAIR IS OVER, WE'LL BE RID OF ANIMORA...

...*AND* GISELLE VILLARD.

THIS IS GOOD.

What's good?

THIS.

WALKING IN THE PARK, ENJOYING THE EVENING. JUST...

...BEING NORMAL.

BEING LIKE I WAS ***BEFORE*** I GOT HANDED THE SIGIL.

Didn't "being normal" for you involve too many parties and too few boyfriends with any redeeming qualities?

NO.

WELL, OKAY, *MAYBE...*

...BUT YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I'M SAYING, RIGHT?

EVER SINCE THAT THING APPEARED ON MY PALM, MY LIFE'S BEEN NON-STOP TURMOIL.

GUILD MASTERS, DEMONS, ETERNAL SPIRITS, YOU NAME IT.

I'M SO GLAD TO TO GET AWAY FROM ALL THE MAGIC, AT LEAST FOR A LITTLE WHILE.

With the exception of the talking squit, whom you adore.

WITH THE EXCEPTION OF THE TALKING SQUIT, WHOM I TOLERATE.

Enjoy it while you can. But there's some stuff you can't just walk away from. Like your creepy boyfriend or whatever it is you consider him.

CAN WE NOT GO THERE RIGHT NOW?

Sure, avoid the question. Then, how about Animora? Wanna talk about that one?

WHAT'S THERE TO TALK ABOUT? MONDRU TOLD US THE OTHER MASTERS WERE GOING TO ***TRY*** BRINGING HER BACK.

HOW DO WE KNOW THEY WERE EVEN SUCCESSFUL? MY SISTER HAD NOUVEAU ADEPTS CAST A MAGICAL SEARCH FOR ANY TRACE OF HER AND THEY CAME UP WITH NOTHING.

Ever think maybe she doesn't **want** to be found out?

EVER THINK SHE'S NOT REALLY HERE? IF SHE ***WERE*** HERE, WOULDN'T THE GUILD SPIRITS HAVE SENSED HER?

GISELLE?

GREAT, RIGHT ON CUE. THAT'S YOU, ALAIN?

I DO HATE TO INTERRUPT...

...BUT I BELIEVE YOU'RE ABOUT TO HAVE VISITORS.

DARROW?

Um...

...just a guess...

...but I'm gonna say NO.

I WAS HAVING SUCH A *NICE* NIGHT, TOO.

HEY!

SNFF SNFF

MM-HMF

GISELLE, WE SPIRITS HAVE TRIED TO BE AS UNOBTRUSIVE AS POSSIBLE...

THRRRRRRRRR

DRRAARGH

...BUT WE FEEL OBLIGED TO INFORM YOU THESE CREATURES LIKELY INTEND YOU HARM.

GEE, WHAT TIPPED YOU OFF?

HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT THESE THINGS *ARE*?

THEY HAVE A...FAMILIARITY... TO US, BUT NONE OF OUR NUMBER CAN REMEMBER ENCOUNTERING THEM.

ALL RIGHT, THEN WE'LL JUST MAKE IT UP AS WE GO.

LOOK, I DON'T KNOW WHAT I EVER DID TO YOU GUYS...

...BUT I WAS TAKING A *WALK.*

DO YOU KNOW HOW LONG IT'S BEEN SINCE I *DID* THAT?

HRRK

ALAIN? ANYBODY ELSE?

ANY SUGGESTIONS THAT MIGHT KEEP ME FROM GETTING EVISCERATED?

*THEY'RE APPARENTLY MINDLESS CREATURES, OR AT LEAST **SINGLE**-MINDED.*

*THOUGH THEY **DO** SEEM TO HAVE A LONG REACH.*

OFFER HELP OR KEEP SILENT, MAGUS. YOU'RE QUITE INGRATIATING WITH A SMIRK ON YOUR FACE.

GRRAR

HANG ON, HE'S GOT—

HKK!

SAVE FOR THEIR RAGE AND THEIR FIXATION UPON YOU, THESE CREATURES ARE BLANK SLATES, GISELLE.

MEANING THEY'VE BEEN CREATED **RECENTLY.**

WHICH MAKES THEM INFINITELY SUSCEPTIBLE TO SPELLS OF TRANSFORMATION.

IF THE FORMS THEY PRESENTLY WEAR THREATEN YOU...

...SIMPLY **CHANGE** THEIR FORMS.

ARROO?

BEAUTIFULLY DONE.

WHATEVER WORKS.

ONE DOWN...

...NO THANKS TO YOU.

What, you want me to stick around down **there?**

I'll get stepped on.

I SHOULD *BE* THAT LUCKY.

HRRRAA

OKAY, BOY...

...HEEL.

BRF?

That's great.

That's what the world really needs, another **gork.**

COULD YOU TRY ***NOT*** BEING A DISTRACTION FOR A CHANGE?

I'VE STILL GOT TO DEAL WITH ONE MORE OF—

AAH!

WHAT'S THAT SOMEBODY SAID ABOUT A LONG REACH?

AND GETTING LONGER ALL THE TIME.

YOU KNOW, I'M USED TO HAVING THE OTHER SPIRITS IN MY HEAD. I DON'T EVEN MIND IT ANYMORE.

BUT ***YOU*** I COULD REALLY DO WITHOUT, MAGUS.

THE SENTIMENT IS WHOLLY MUTUAL.

YEAH, WELL, UNFORTUNATELY YOU'RE ALL PRETTY MUCH A PACKAGE DEAL.

SO, WITH *ONE* EXCEPTION...

...THANKS FOR THE HELP.

WE ARE YOUR SERVANTS, GISELLE.

What do you think *THAT* was all about?

I WISH I KNEW. I'VE SAID IT BEFORE, MAYBE THE SIGIL JUST MAKES ME A MAGNET FOR THIS STUFF.

I'M GETTING A LITTLE MORE COMFORTABLE WITH IT....

...BUT I HAVE TO WONDER WHAT'S *NEXT.*

I KNOW ALL THAT I NEED TO KNOW.

I UNDERSTAND THIS ***MYSTIC***. I UNDERSTAND HOW TO BRING ABOUT HER ***DEMISE***.

AND AS MUCH AS I'D LIKE TO DESTROY YOUR PRECIOUS ETERNAL SPIRITS FOR IMPRISONING ME IN THE FIRST PLACE...

...A BARGAIN'S A BARGAIN.

YOU'LL HAVE YOUR SPIRITS BACK SOON ENOUGH.

MAGUS? SHE ***SAYS*** ALL THE RIGHT THINGS. DO WE DARE TRUST HER?

IT DOESN'T MATTER IF ***WE*** TRUST ***HER***...

...WHAT MATTERS IS THAT SHE UNDERESTIMATES US. AS LONG AS ANIMORA PERCEIVES US AS WEAKLINGS WHO FEAR HER...

...SHE'LL ***NEVER*** EXPECT BETRAYAL.

CATTLE.

THEY'LL *NEVER* EXPECT BETRAYAL.

FIRST THE VILLARD WOMAN MUST BE DEALT WITH. BUT ONCE THAT'S ACCOMPLISHED, THESE FOOL MASTERS AND THEIR SPIRITS ARE GOING TO **SUFFER.**

AND WHEN THIS PLANET IS MINE, I'LL USE IT TO—

ANIMORA.

I TRUST YOU REMEMBER ME?

INGRA DIDN'T WASTE ANY TIME SENDING HER TOY TO LOOK AFTER ME, DID SHE?

YOU *WERE* HER FAVORITE.

ONCE, PERHAPS.

BUT I FELL FROM FAVOR LONG AGO. THIS IS THE SCRAP SHE THROWS ME.

AND I VERY MUCH DOUBT INGRA'S AWARE OF YOUR NEWFOUND FREEDOM.

I CERTAINLY DIDN'T TELL HER.

MY PRESENCE ON THIS DREARY MOTE *IS* AT INGRA'S REQUEST. BUT NOT BECAUSE OF YOU.

HERE, I CALL MYSELF DARROW. I'M TO SWAY THE VILLARD WOMAN WHO BEARS THE SIGIL OF POWER.

I BELIEVE *YOU* HAVE A CERTAIN INTEREST IN HER AS WELL.

COINCIDENCE IS A CURIOUS THING, IS IT NOT?

IF YOU *DO* SERVE INGRA...

...WHY SEEK ME OUT? I'M SURE *YOU* HAVEN'T FORGOTTEN OUR...

...DALLIANCE.

CALL IT WHAT IT WAS, ANIMORA.

YOU USED ME.

BUT THEN SO DID INGRA. AND SHE CONTINUES TO DO SO NOW.

IN A WAY, I'M JUST AS MUCH AN EXILE AS YOU ARE.

AN EXILE FOR THE MOMENT.

THIS WORLD IS RIFE WITH ENERGIES. CONQUERING IT IS MERELY A STEPPING STONE.

I ***WILL*** RETURN TO ELYSIA AND HAVE MY REVENGE UPON THAT WITCH.

FOR BANISHING ME.

FOR TURNING ME INTO ***THIS.***

WE WERE CLOSE ONCE, YOU AND I. I SEEM TO REMEMBER THAT TIME FONDLY.

I'M INTIMATELY FAMILIAR WITH GISELLE VILLARD. SHE'S ***POWERFUL.*** TRUTHFULLY, SHE HAS YET TO REALIZE ***HOW*** POWERFUL.

MY ASSISTANCE COULD PROVE EXTREMELY USEFUL IN WHAT'S TO COME.

YOU'D TURN YOUR BACK ON THE FIRST?

I'D LIKE NOTHING BETTER THAN TO SEE INGRA BROUGHT DOWN.

TO SEE ***ALL*** OF THEM BROUGHT DOWN.

SO I BELIEVE ***I'M*** BEST SERVED...

...BY SERVING *YOU.*

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NOW
I'M MAD.

Ooooh, NOW YOU'RE MAD.

I'M SCARED. CAN YOU TELL?

IF I WAS WEARING PANTS, I'D WET MYSELF.

BAD ENOUGH I'M STUCK FIGHTING YOU. WHY DO I HAVE TO ***LISTEN*** TO YOU?

Aw, DID YOUR FEELINGS GET HURT? GOT YOUR CUTE LITTLE MAGIC ROBES ALL IN A TWIST?

FORGET I MENTIONED IT.

HAVE TO DO BETTER THAN THIS, GIRLIE!

Oh, DON'T WORRY...

...I WILL.

WHAT, THAT?

THAT WAS BETTER?

I'M RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOU AND YOU MISSED! YOU COULDN'T HIT THE OCEAN FROM THE BEACH!

IF YOU CAN'T DO THE SIMPLE STUFF HOW DO YOU EVER EXPECT TO—

SPLOOSH

Hmf.

NOT SO *CHATTY* ANYMORE, ARE YOU?

QUITE CLEVER, GISELLE.

NOT THAT I DON'T APPRECIATE IT, BUT COULD YOU HAVE PICKED A ***MORE*** ANNOYING SPARRING PARTNER FOR ME?

NEEZ, NADY, NU PWAY WUFF.

WHAT?

WHERE'D YOU GET THIS ONE, DARROW? SHE'S GOT SOMETHING EXTRA.

I SAID, "JEEZ, LADY, YOU PLAY ROUGH."

I THOUGHT THIS WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A FRIENDLY LITTLE TRAINING SESSION, BUT...

...YOW!

SHE DOES AT THAT.

I'LL BE IN TOUCH IF I NEED YOU AGAIN.

YEAH, DO THAT.

HEY, EVERYTHING OKAY? YOU SEEM A LITTLE PREOCCUPIED LATELY.

DARROW?

NOT KEEPING SECRETS FROM ME, ARE YOU?

Hm?

Oh. NO.

NO, OF COURSE NOT.

MY APOLOGIES IF I'VE BEEN A BIT DISTRACTED.

JUST... *THINGS*... ON MY MIND.

STILL QUITE THE MYSTERY MAN, THOUGH, AREN'T YOU?

YOU REALLY THINK SO?

I'M TRUTHFULLY NOT ALL THAT INTERESTING, GISELLE. NOT HALF SO INTERESTING AS *YOU*...

...YOU AND THIS POWER OF YOURS WE'VE BEEN HONING.

WAS THIS A HELPFUL EXERCISE, BRINGING YOU TO THE SPIRIT PLANE?

I APPRECIATE *ALL* THE HELP YOU'VE GIVEN ME. I'LL HAVE TO PUT IT TO USE IF THE RUMOR ABOUT ANIMORA IS TRUE.

THE RANTINGS OF THE ASTRAL MASTER? I FRANKLY WOULDN'T PUT MUCH STOCK IN IT, CONSIDERING THE SOURCE.

I'LL TRY NOT TO TAKE OFFENSE...

...CONSIDERING THE SOURCE.

HELLO, GISELLE.

YOUR PROGRESS CONTINUES TO BE IMPRESSIVE.

Ah.

THE *SPIRITS* ARRIVE.

I'M *TRYING* ANYWAY.

ALAIN, DO YOU KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT ANIMORA? HAVE ANY OF YOU...SENSED HER? ANYTHING LIKE THAT?

WE'RE RECEPTACLES OF KNOWLEDGE, GISELLE. WE'RE NOT OMNISCIENT.

USURPING ANIMORA'S ENERGIES ALLOWED US TO LIVE ON IN SPIRIT FORM, BUT WE HAVE NO SPECIAL SENSITIVITY TO —

IF...

...WELL, IF YOU THINK WE SHOULD.

I DO.

THERE'S STILL A GOOD DEAL OF THE DAY LEFT...

LOVE TO STAY AND CHAT, BUT I THINK IT'S TIME WE HEADED BACK TO THE CATHEDRAL.

WOULDN'T YOU AGREE, GISELLE?

...AND SO MUCH TO ACCOMPLISH.

THANKS.

REALLY.

DON'T MENTION IT.

THINK I'LL GO FIND MY SISTER AND SEE HOW SHE'S DOING.

IF YOU DON'T MIND, OF COURSE.

OF COURSE NOT. WE CAN STAY HERE AT THE CATHEDRAL AS LONG AS YOU LIKE.

IN FACT...

...TAKE YOUR TIME.

MEEP!

STAY RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE YOU MANGY LITTLE BEAST.

THOSE ***ORANGE EYES*** HAVE STARED AT ME FOR THE LAST TIME.

BUT...

...WHERE DID IT *GO?*

...AND THIS MAKES IT OFFICIAL.

IN RETURN FOR FREE PASSAGE THROUGH YOUR HOME PLANE, THE DONADI RECEIVE RIGHT OF FIRST REFUSAL ON ALL NOUVEAU REQUESTS TO DRAW UPON THE ETHEREAL RESERVE.

I HOPE YOU'RE AS PLEASED WITH THIS AGREEMENT AS I AM.

HISTORICALLY, DOING BUSINESS WITH THE NOUVEAU GUILD HAS BEEN TO OUR MUTUAL ADVANTAGE. IT REMAINS SO.

A BETTER CHOICE OF GUILD MASTER COULD NOT HAVE BEEN MADE.

THAT'S KIND OF YOU TO SAY.

FEEL FREE TO AVAIL YOURSELF OF THE CATHEDRAL'S AMENITIES FOR AS LONG AS YOU LIKE.

THANK YOU, BUT WE TAKE OUR LEAVE. TO REMAIN LONG UPON YOUR PLANE IS...

...DISCONCERTING...

...TO US.

DEFTLY HANDLED, GUILD MASTER.

THE DWELLERS OF THE DONADI PLANE ARE NOTORIOUSLY DIFFICULT NEGOTIATORS.

THANKS.

I'M FINALLY STARTING TO FEEL LIKE I'M GETTING A HANDLE ON THIS JOB.

GEN?

ANY TIME IN YOUR SCHEDULE FOR WAYWARD SISTERS?

NOK

SPARRING SESSION'S OVER?

YEAH. I THINK I'M GETTING A HANDLE ON THIS JOB.

I JUST SAID THAT.

Huh?

COME ON, I COULD USE A BREAK.

WHAT? WHERE ARE WE—

JUST COME ON...

NEVERMIND.

HOW'D THE NEGOTIATION GO?

FINE, JUST FINE...

...THOUGH I WOULDN'T MIND HAVING THAT SPIRIT IN YOUR HEAD THROW A LITTLE ADVICE MY WAY ONCE IN A WHILE.

I HATE IT WHEN SHE DOES THIS.

THAT'S BETTER.

I SPENT SO MUCH TIME HERE AS A GIRL...

...ESPECIALLY AFTER MOM AND DAD DIED...

...THIS GROVE FEELS MORE LIKE HOME TO ME THAN ANY OTHER PLACE I CAN THINK OF.

I GUESS IT SEEMED ***SAFE*** HERE. THE WORLD MADE ***SENSE*** HERE.

AND NOW I'M GUILD MASTER.

FOR SO LONG I DIDN'T LET MYSELF BELIEVE IT WOULD EVER REALLY HAPPEN.

I'M GLAD IT FINALLY DID, GEN. YOU DESERVE IT AFTER ALL THE WORK YOU PUT INTO PURSUING IT.

IS IT WHAT YOU THOUGHT IT WOULD BE?

YES.

WELL... YES AND NO.

I STUDIED FOR SO MANY YEARS AND PUT ASIDE EVERYTHING—FRIENDS AND ANY KIND OF LIFE OUTSIDE THE GUILD. ALL TO ACHIEVE ***THIS.***

AND NOW THAT I ***HAVE*** ACHIEVED IT, I'M FINDING THE POLITICAL ASPECTS OF THE JOB ARE A LOT MORE COMPLICATED THAN THE MAGICAL ONES.

IT DOESN'T LEAVE MUCH TIME FOR ANYTHING ELSE.

YOU NEVER *WERE* A SOCIAL BUTTERFLY.

NO, BUT YOU MORE THAN MADE UP FOR ME IN THAT DEPARTMENT, DIDN'T YOU?

I'M SAYING I'D AT LEAST LIKE THE *CHANCE* FOR A LIFE OUTSIDE THE GUILD. I DON'T WANT TO WAKE UP ONE MORNING AND REALIZE MY ENTIRE LIFE HAS SLIPPED PAST ME.

DID YOU EVER HEAR FROM THAT ARTIST WHO WAS SO OBVIOUSLY TAKEN WITH YOU? WHAT WAS HIS NAME?

THIERRY?

HE SEEMED NICE ENOUGH, BUT NO, I HAVEN'T SEEN HIM SINCE THAT NIGHT AT THE WATERFRONT.

WHY? INTERESTED?

WHO? *ME?*

WITH AN ARTIST? *NO,* I WAS JUST...

...YOU KNOW, JUST CURIOUS. ASKING IF YOU'D SEEN HIM, THAT'S ALL.

JUST CURIOUS. Uh-huh.

I'M PERFECTLY HAPPY WITH DARROW ANYWAY. I KNOW YOU'RE STILL NOT REAL FOND OF HIM, BUT...

...WHEN I'M WITH HIM IT'S LIKE SOMETHING COMES OVER ME. I JUST FEEL...

...CONTENT.

AS LONG AS WE'RE PLAYING TRUE CONFESSIONS I'LL BE HONEST. I *DO* HAVE MISGIVINGS ABOUT HIM.

HE JUST FEELS *WRONG* TO ME. THREATENING, SOMEHOW.

DARROW'S BEEN NOTHING BUT A GENTLEMAN. IF THERE'S A *THREAT* IT'S ANIMORA...

...ASSUMING WHAT THE ASTRAL MASTER TOLD US IS TRUE.

LET'S FACE IT, MONDRU'S NOT THE MOST RELIABLE SOURCE.

I'VE HAD NOUVEAU ADEPTS CASTING SEARCH SPELLS FOR ANY HINT OF ANIMORA AND THEY'VE FOUND NOTHING.

RIGHT WHERE YOU SAID SHE'D BE.

GUILD MASTER VILLARD, PLEASE, WE'RE YOUR BODYGUARDS.

WHEN YOU DISAPPEAR LIKE THAT IT MAKES IT IMPOSSIBLE FOR US TO DO OUR JOBS.

YOU'RE RIGHT, MY APOLOGIES.

WE UNDERSTAND YOU NEED YOUR PRIVACY, BUT WE NEED TO KNOW WHERE—

koff

GHHK?!

GAAHLG!

IT'S *GOOD* TO MAKE AN ENTRANCE, DON'T YOU THINK?

IT'S REALLY HER. IT'S—

ANIMORA.

GET TO THE CATHEDRAL, MASTER VILLARD! I'LL DO WHAT I CAN TO—

ERDAH!

I HAVE *NO INTEREST* IN DEALING WITH PAWNS.

SHE'S HERE FOR ME, GEN.

SHE'S GOT TO BE HERE FOR *ME!*

SHE'LL GET *BOTH* OF US, 'ELLE!

HNF!

YOU'RE NOT THE ONE...

...IT'S YOUR *SISTER* I WANT.

THEN CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR.

GISELLE, EVEN WITH THE POWER YOU WIELD, ANIMORA IS NOT AN OPPONENT TO BE TAKEN LIGHTLY.

OUR COMBINED MIGHT WAS BARELY ENOUGH TO HARNESS HER CENTURIES AGO.

YEAH, WELL, I'D BETTER BE ABLE TO COUNT ON THE SEVEN OF YOU ***THIS*** TIME.

WHO?

AFF

FOUL BEAST!

MONDRU?

YOUR EVIL WILL NOT BE ALLOWED TO SPREAD ACROSS THE WORLD!

MY FELLOW MASTERS WERE MAD TO HAVE UNFETTERED YOU!

QUITE TRUE. THEY HELD THE KEY TO MY PRISON.

HOW UNFORTUNATE *YOU'RE* THE FIRST TO PAY FOR THEIR MISTAKE.

THE GUILD SPIRITS IMPRISONED YOU FIVE HUNDRED YEARS AGO...

...THEY'LL HELP ME DO IT *AGAIN!*

GHH

NNNFF

YOU DON'T LACK FOR FORTITUDE. YOU REMIND ME OF ***MYSELF*** ONCE.

UNDERSTAND, I HOLD NO PERSONAL ANIMOSITY TOWARD YOU.

THAT MAKES ME FEEL ***SO*** MUCH BETTER.

COME ON, MONDRU, ON YOUR FEET.

WE'RE NOT GOING TO BEAT ANIMORA.

MNF

WITH YOUR DEMISE ALL CIRESS BELONGS TO ME...

...AND I'LL HAVE MY VENGEANCE UPON THOSE WHO LOCKED ME AWAY.

EXPECTING ME TO JUST ROLL OVER AND PLAY DEAD? WE'RE...

WE HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE.

...GEN?

WHERE ARE YOU...

...GOING?

GISELLE...

...SHE'S COMING.

THIS WORLD IS MY STEPPING STONE...

...AND NEITHER YOU NOR ANYONE ELSE CAN STAND IN MY WAY.

WNF!

ANIMORA MEANS TO DESTROY US ALL. OUR EXISTENCE DEPENDS ON THIS... THIS **NOVICE!**

THEN IF FOR NO OTHER REASON THAN SELF-PRESERVATION, MAGUS, **AID HER.**

GEN'S STAFF OF OFFICE?

I'LL USE WHATEVER I CAN GET MY...

...HANDS ON.

DARROW! I NEED YOUR ***HELP!*** ANIMORA'S HERE AND —

I KNOW.

I MADE SURE YOU WERE HERE SO SHE COULD FIND YOU.

YOU...

...YOU *WHAT?* WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?

DO I TRULY HAVE TO SPELL IT OUT FOR YOU?

EVEN *I* DIDN'T BELIEVE YOU WERE THAT NAÏVE.

YOU *USED* ME!

ALL THIS TIME YOU WERE *USING* ME, YOU SON OF A—

LANGUAGE.

AT LEAST TAKE COMFORT IN KNOWING YOU WERE BEATEN BY YOUR BETTERS.

YOU NEVER HAD A CHANCE.

AND NEITHER DOES THIS PLANET.

EXODUS

WELL.

THAT WAS FAIRLY THOROUGH.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Oh, THE USUAL.

CONQUER THE WORLD.

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MYSTIC

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...INTERRUPT YOUR REGULARLY SCHEDULED SPELLCASTS TO BRING YOU THIS BULLETIN!

THIS IS **JEAN DUMONT** REPORTING FROM THE NOUVEAU GUILD CATHEDRAL...

...OR WHAT **USED** TO BE THE NOUVEAU GUILD CATHEDRAL!

AS YOU CAN SEE BEHIND ME, THE ENTIRE STRUCTURE HAS BEEN LEVELED BY A COLOSSAL EXPLOSION THAT APPARENTLY CAME WITHOUT WARNING A SHORT TIME AGO.

THE BLAST'S SPECIFIC CAUSE IS UNKNOWN AT THIS POINT, AS IS THE NUMBER OF CASUALTIES INVOLVED, DUE TO WARD SPELLS THAT ARE KEEPING RESCUERS AT A DISTANCE.

IT'S **ALSO** UNKNOWN WHAT, IF ANYTHING, THIS MIGHT HAVE TO DO WITH THE RECENT INSTALLATION OF GENEVIEVE VILLARD AS NOUVEAU GUILD MASTER.

I'LL BE ATTEMPTING TO GET CLOSER AND BRING YOU DEVELOPMENTS AS THEY OCCUR...

THAT WAS SIMPLE ENOUGH.

THIS *GISELLE* WAS EVEN EASIER TO DISPOSE OF THAN I'D EXPECTED.

WITH *YOUR* HELP, OF COURSE.

HAPPY TO BE OF SERVICE, ANIMORA. *ESPECIALLY SO,* IN THIS CASE.

AND NOW?

STRIP THE ETERNAL SPIRITS FROM THE CORPSE OF THE VILLARD WOMAN, I SUPPOSE, SO I CAN CRUSH THEM FROM EXISTENCE.

THE SAME FATE AWAITS THE *PRESENT* GUILD MASTERS, OF COURSE.

I'LL HAVE TO EXPUNGE ALL OF THEM BEFORE THIS WORLD IS TRULY MINE.

THEN WE TURN OUR ATTENTION TO ELYSIA?

THEN WE TURN OUR ATTENTION TO ELYSIA.

AND TO **INGRA.**

YOU'VE CHOSEN YOUR LOYALTIES WELL THIS TIME, DARROW.

WE'LL *BOTH* EXACT OUR REVENGE UPON THE FIRST...

...BECAUSE THERE'S NO ONE TO STOP US.

AND WE SHOULD HELP YOU *WHY?*

WHY?!

HOW CAN YOU EVEN ASK THAT? WHAT OTHER *CHOICE* IS THERE?

ANIMORA IS *FREE!* SHE INTENDS TO TAKE ALL OF CIRESS FOR HER OWN, JUST AS SHE TRIED TO DO FIVE CENTURIES AGO!

WE'RE THE SWORN PROTECTORS OF THIS WORLD. YOU CAN'T JUST STAND THERE AND DO NOTHING.

YOU'RE THE ONES WHO UNLEASHED HER. YOU *MUST* REALIZE SHE'S GOING TO BETRAY WHATEVER BARGAIN YOU'VE MADE WITH HER!

LET US FACE CERTAIN TRUTHS, GENEVIEVE.

YOUR SISTER THE THIEF IS MORE THAN LIKELY *DEAD* AT ANIMORA'S HAND BY NOW.

PRAY SHE'S NOT. FOR *YOUR* SAKE!

GENEVIEVE...

IT WILL TAKE ALL THE GUILD MASTERS TO AGAIN IMPRISON ANIMORA. ALL *SEVEN* OF US.

SO YOU SEE IT'S REALLY NOT A QUESTION OF *US* HELPING *YOU*. IT'S A QUESTION OF *YOU* DOING WHAT YOU'RE TOLD. OTHERWISE...

...ALL CIRESS WILL BE LOST.

YOU BLACK-HEARTED MONSTER.

YOU ORCHESTRATED THIS FROM THE VERY *BEGINNING!*

Oh, INDEED.

WE FREE ANIMORA, SHE DESTROYS YOUR SISTER, WE RETRIEVE OUR SPIRITS, THEN *YOU* HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO AID US IN SHACKLING ANIMORA AGAIN.

THE CIRCLE CLOSES, AND THE *TRUTH* DIES AS QUICK A DEATH AS YOUR SISTER.

IMAGINE THE POLITICAL VALUE OF THE GATHERED GUILD MASTERS HEROICALLY ARRIVING JUST IN TIME TO CAGE THE BEAST.

SO TELL ME, NOUVEAU MASTER...

...WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO?

Giselle?

MMNNN

Still with us?

SKITTER? HOW ARE YOU... HERE?

AND WHY ARE YOUR *EYES* SO BRIGHT?

My well-balanced diet. Don't worry about it.

Guess I was just in the right place when the cathedral collapsed.

Yeah, that sounds good.

Listen, time for you to get yourself up and go after Animora. ***YOU'RE*** the only one who can, but that's not gonna happen while you're taking a nap here.

WHAT AM *I* GOING TO DO AGAINST HER? SHE PULLED DOWN THE ENTIRE CATHEDRAL.

EVEN MY SISTER DESERTED ME. ANIMORA'S...

...SHE'S TOO MUCH. TOO POWERFUL.

You don't need your sister. You don't need ***ANYONE***.

What do you think that thing on your hand is ***FOR?*** You have to pass ***THIS*** test before you're ready to move on.

Believe me, you get close enough...

"...you'll see exactly what you're made of."

UNLESS I'M SORELY MISTAKEN, THE GUILD MASTERS ARE LIKELY CLINGING TOGETHER SOMEWHERE...

...INCLUDING THE TWO WHO FLED. THEY MAKE THEMSELVES A TARGET TO BE ELIMINATED IN ONE STROKE.

AND ONCE THEY'RE NO LONGER AN OBSTACLE, THE POWER INHERENT IN THIS WORLD WILL BE MINE TO...

...WHAT?

IT'S NOT POSSIBLE...

MMM

ROUND TWO.

THAT'S my girl.

I'VE MANAGED TO WORK MY WAY CLOSER TO THE RUINS OF THE CATHEDRAL, WHERE I'M WITNESSING A PYROTECHNIC BATTLE BEING WAGED AMONG THE DEBRIS.

I'M NEAR ENOUGH TO SEE ONE OF THE PARTICIPANTS, A YOUNG WOMAN UNFAMILIAR TO ME BUT WHOSE **GARB** AT LEAST SUGGESTS SOME TIE TO THE NOUVEAU GUILD.

HER OPPONENT ISN'T VISIBLE FROM MY VANTAGE POINT. LET ME SEE IF...

MORE ***RESILIENT*** THAN WE ANTICIPATED, ISN'T SHE?

ANIMORA.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, I CAN SCARCELY BELIEVE WHAT I'M ABOUT TO REPORT TO YOU, BUT THE OTHER PARTICIPANT IN THIS BATTLE IS **ANIMORA!**

SOMEHOW THE GREATEST EVIL TO EVER WALK CIRESS HAS **RETURNED!**

YOU ACTUALLY BELIEVE YOU CAN *PROTECT* THIS WORLD.

THAT'S WHAT I'M *TOLD,* ANYWAY.

I KNOW I CAN HANDLE WHATEVER *YOU* THROW AT ME...

...AND I'M *DAMN* WELL GOING TO MAKE SURE *HE* GETS WHAT'S COMING TO HIM.

APPARENTLY, SHE'S UPSET WITH YOU.

APPARENTLY.

SHE COULDN'T HOPE TO DEFEAT *ME,* AND DESPITE APPEARANCES TO THE CONTRARY, YOU AND I ARE THE SAME.

HOW DOES SHE THINK SHE'LL BEST TWO OF—

SHE WON'T BE DOING IT *ALONE,* FOR STARTERS.

NNF!

HOLD, EVIL ONE!

HOWEVER YOU'VE MANAGED TO FREE YOURSELF FROM YOUR RIGHTFUL PRISON, WE SHALL ***RETURN*** YOU TO IT!

THE GUILD MASTERS OF CIRESS WILL AGAIN DEFEND THEIR WORLD!

Oh, LISTEN TO *YOU*...

THAT ONE I WARNED ABOUT INTERFERING.

REPORTS OF MY SISTER'S DEMISE A LITTLE PREMATURE, MAGUS?

NOW'S NOT THE TIME FOR SELF-CONGRATULATION, GENEVIEVE...

JUST WHEN ALL SEEMED LOST THERE'S **HOPE!**

THE GUILD MASTERS, INCLUDING VILLARD OF NOUVEAU, HAVE ARRIVED AND VOWED TO **FIGHT** FOR CIRESS!

...CONCENTRATE ON THE TASK AT HAND.

GLAD YOU'RE BACK, GEN...

...BUT I'M A BIT SURPRISED AT WHO'S ***WITH*** YOU. I DIDN'T FIGURE THE OTHER MASTERS WOULD BE ON ***MY*** SIDE.

LONG STORY.

EVEN ***WITH*** THEM I'M NOT REAL OPTIMISTIC ABOUT OUR CHANCES.

ONE THING AT A TIME.

FEEL FREE TO SAY *"I TOLD YOU SO"* ABOUT DARROW.

THAT'S A MISTAKE I'M GOING TO GO FIX RIGHT NOW.

YOU USED ME!

Hmh.

YOU ALWAYS DID DISPLAY AN EXCELLENT GRASP OF THE OBVIOUS, MY DEAR.

GYHH!

OF COURSE I USED YOU!

FIRST TO SERVE *ONE* MASTER AND THEN *ANOTHER*.

AHF!

SKROOM!

YOU KNOW, DARROW...

...OR WHATEVER YOUR REAL NAME IS...

...OVER THE YEARS I'VE HOOKED UP WITH A *LOT* OF LOSERS.

I'M TAKING ALL OF THEM OUT ON YOU!

ANIMORA POSES THE LARGER THREAT, GISELLE!

THERE ISN'T TIME TO MAKE THIS A PERSONAL BATTLE.

WANNA BET? JUST LET ME GET MY HANDS AROUND HIS NECK.

GHHH!

INGRA.

INGRA SAID THEY COULD KILL US...

WHAT...

...WHAT'S HAPPENING? IS THIS SOMETHING YOU'RE DOING?

NO, GISELLE. WHATEVER THIS... PROCESS...IS, IT'S NOT OF OUR MAKING.

GISELLE, *PLEASE!*

YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU'RE CAPABLE OF!

...GHH...

...CONTINUE TO DRAIN ME LIKE THIS...

...YOU'LL *DESTROY* ME...

...PLEASE...

...SPARE ME...

YOU'RE LUCKY.

LUCKY THERE'S MORE MERCY IN *MY* HEART THAN IN YOURS.

...gaaahh...

*WE BANISHED ANIMORA **ONCE**, GISELLE. WE'LL AID YOU AGAINST HER IN ANY WAY WE CAN.*

I'M NOT SURE I'LL NEED IT. DARROW SAID HE AND ANIMORA WERE THE ***SAME***...

...AND ANOTHER GUILD MASTER TOPPLES BEFORE ANIMORA!

THE SITUATION IS FAST BECOMING GRIM, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, AS THE DEFENDERS OF CIRESS ARE FELLED BY THE FURIOUS ONSLAUGHT!

AGH!

IS THERE NO ONE WHO CAN FACE THIS FIGURE OF EVIL?!

AAAGH!

DOWN TO US.

I NEVER THOUGHT I'D BE MAKING MY LAST STAND AT YOUR SIDE.

PERHAPS YOU WOULDN'T BE IF YOUR SISTER HADN'T DESERTED THE BATTLE!

Oh, STOP BICKERING. I'LL HANDLE HER.

'ELLE?

THESE OTHERS WERE DISTRACTIONS. THE ONLY ONE REMOTELY RESEMBLING A CHALLENGE HERE IS ***YOU***...

...YOU AND MY OLD ENEMIES ***WITHIN*** YOU.

YOU FAIRLY ***BOIL*** WITH POWER NOW. WHERE DID YOU ***GET*** IT?

SEEMS LIKE I ***BORROWED*** IT...

"...SINCE DARROW WASN'T GOING TO BE USING IT ANYMORE."

DON'T WORRY, BOSS, I GOTCHA.

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? "*BORROWED?*"

WHY DON'T I COME A LITTLE CLOSER AND ***SHOW*** YOU?

YOU ***WITHSTAND*** ME.

A MERE MORTAL AND YOU ACTUALLY ***WITHSTAND*** ME. WHAT HAS THAT MARK OF POWER ***MADE*** OF YOU?

BELIEVE ME, I'D TELL YOU IF *I* KNEW.

NOW HOLD STILL...

WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO—

...WHY DO I FEEL SO...

...WEAK?

WHERE AM...

...NO.

NO, NO, NO...

...NOT ALL OF YOU...

...NOT AGAIN...

SO GOOD TO SEE YOU AGAIN AFTER SUCH A LONG TIME.

FITTING, ISN'T IT? WE'LL BE YOUR **JAILERS** ONCE MORE.

WELCOME TO **OUR** PLANE, ANIMORA.

AND DRAINED OF POWER AS YOU ARE, IT SHOULD BE A **LENGTHY** STAY.

NOT AGAIN!

NOT AGAIN!

Hmm...

I MIGHT NEED TO *GAG* HER, TOO.

WHAT?

NOTHING. JUST A LITTLE ECHO FROM THE SPIRIT PLANE'S NEW RESIDENT.

SO THE SPIRITS WILL BE KEEPING ANIMORA LOCKED UP?

YES...

...WHAT *OF* OUR SPIRITS?

WHAT *ABOUT* THEM? NOTHING'S CHANGED, EXCEPT MY SISTER NEEDS A NEW CATHEDRAL.

I COULDN'T DIVEST MYSELF OF THE SPIRITS IF I WANTED TO, AND TRUTHFULLY I *DON'T* WANT TO ANYMORE.

YOU'RE NOT GETTING THEM BACK. GET USED TO IT.

AND LET'S FACE IT, YOU DON'T NEED THE SPIRITS AS MUCH AS YOU NEED THE *APPEARANCE* OF HAVING THEM.

YOU WANT EVERYONE TO BELIEVE NOTHING HAS CHANGED.

MY LIFE IS A LOT LESS COMPLICATED IF NO ONE *KNOWS* THE SPIRITS ARE WITHIN ME.

SO HOW ABOUT AN ARRANGEMENT? I'LL KEEP YOUR SECRET AND YOU CAN TAKE CREDIT FOR ANIMORA'S DEFEAT.

IN RETURN, YOU LEAVE ME ALONE.

TRUCE?

IT SEEMS WE *ARE* BOUND TOGETHER.

VERY WELL...

...A *TRUCE.*

HEY!

YOU THERE!

WHAT JUST HAPPENED? AND WHAT'S *YOUR* INVOLVEMENT?

Um... BYSTANDER.

YOU WANT TO TALK TO THE GUILD MASTERS. *THEY'RE* THE ONES WHO SAVED THE WORLD.

NICE. You came through when you had to and maybe learned a little something in the process.

What's next, O Mystic protector of Ciress?

AFTER *THIS?*

I THINK I DESERVE A BATH.

Well, actually, I was talking a little more long term. You know, *THE GRAND SCHEME,* that sort of thing.

ALL RIGHT, THEN. A *LONG* BATH.

=sigh=

Maybe that's a discussion we'll save for later.

...SO A MOMENTOUS DAY COMES TO A CLOSE. OUR PROTECTORS HAVE TRIUMPHED, EVIL HAS BEEN BANISHED...

...AND CIRESS IS SAFE ONCE AGAIN.

FROM THE RUINS OF THE NOUVEAU CATHEDRAL, THIS IS JEAN DUMONT, SIGNING OFF.

This delicate pencil rendering of Giselle was a gift to CrossGen founder Mark Alessi by artist Tom Fleming.

Pin-up by Fabrizio Fiorentino, CrossGen's latest Associate Penciler, with inks by Andy Smith and colors by Michael Atiyeh. Look for backup stories by Fabrizio in upcoming issues of MYSTIC.

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WHAT S THIS?

WHAT'S *WHAT?*

THIS ONE HERE.

Oh, THAT.

HARDY *HAR.*

LOOKS IMPORTANT.

THAT'S A *BOOK.*

COME ON, WHAT IS IT? THIS IS THE GUILD MASTER'S PRIVATE STUDY...

...SO *YOU* MUST KNOW, GEN.

THIS *IS* THE GUILD MASTER'S PRIVATE STUDY, SO TECHNICALLY YOU SHOULDN'T EVEN BE HERE, GISELLE.

WELL...

...TECHNICALLY...

...EVER SINCE I GOT THE SIGIL...

YOOCH!

...I HAVE *ALL* THE GUILD SPIRITS ROLLING AROUND IN MY HEAD.

My tail is not a pull toy!

SO I'VE *REALLY* GOT AS MUCH RIGHT AS YOU.

You have awakened a slumbering giant! Beware my wrath!

SERIOUSLY, GEN. WHAT IS THIS?

A MEMOIR.

BY LeCAVALIER.

IT RECOUNTS WHAT HAPPENED WHEN THE GUILD MASTERS FACED ANIMORA THE FIRST TIME.

FIVE HUNDRED YEARS AGO?

EVERYBODY KNOWS THAT STORY. IT'S PRACTICALLY THE FIRST THING THEY TEACH US IN SCHOOL.

THIS ISN'T THE STORY THEY TAUGHT YOU IN SCHOOL. ***OPEN IT,*** IF YOU REALLY HAVE TO.

I DEFEATED ANIMORA WHEN SHE RETURNED. IF THERE'S ***MORE*** TO KNOW ABOUT HER I'D LIKE—

THERE'S NO NEED FOR YOU TO READ ABOUT IT, GISELLE.

LeCAVALIER?

YOU'RE CHARGED WITH BEING THE MYSTIC PROTECTOR OF CIRESS...

...THIS IS A STORY YOU **SHOULD** HEAR.

FIVE CENTURIES AGO I WAS AS **YOU** ARE...

...FLESH AND BLOOD RATHER THAN THIS SPIRIT FORM I HOLD NOW.

I'D BEEN MASTER OF THE NOUVEAU GUILD FOR A DECADE.

CIRESS WAS THE SAME MAGICAL WORLD **THEN** AS IT IS NOW...

"...BUT IT WAS A WORLD AT WAR, THE MAJOR GUILDS AND THEIR VARIOUS MASTERS LOCKED IN A CONSTANT STATE OF CONFLICT.

"I LED NOUVEAU.

"THERE WAS AUNMAI OF ENCHANTRESS...

"...JINAI OF DJINN.

"...HEROTUS OF TANTRIC...

"...MINDOKA OF SHAMAN...

"...MAGUS OF DARK MAGI, OF COURSE...

"...ADAYA OF ASTRAL...

"...AND NALIA OF TAROC.

EACH OF US VIED FOR SUPREMACY, MAKING AND BREAKING ALLEGIANCES, ENGAGING IN OPEN AND CLANDESTINE WARFARE.

EVENTUALLY WE WOULD HAVE TORN EACH OTHER APART, AND THE PLANET WITH US.

THAT MUCH YOU KNOW ALREADY. THAT MUCH IS ***TRUE***.

WAIT... ***EIGHT*** MAJOR GUILDS? BUT THERE ARE ONLY ***SEVEN*** NOW.

YOU CALLED THE EIGHTH ONE THE... *TAROC* GUILD?

"ITS MAGIC WAS BASED UPON THE POWER INHERENT IN THE CARDS, THEIR MYRIAD PATTERNS, THEIR COMPLEX ARRANGEMENTS.

"NALIA HAD BEEN TAROC'S MASTER FOR A RELATIVELY SHORT TIME, YET SHE'D PROVEN HERSELF AS CAPABLE A ***LEADER*** AS SHE WAS A ***SORCERESS***.

"SHE WAS BEAUTIFUL. SHE WAS BRILLIANT.

"SHE WAS ***MINE***.

"OUR LOVE AFFAIR WAS A SECRET WE KEPT FROM ALL OTHERS, EVEN OUR OWN GUILDS.

"*PROOF* OF AN ALLIANCE BETWEEN NOUVEAU AND TAROC MIGHT HAVE SPURRED THE REMAINING GUILDS INTO A CONFEDERATION TO OPPOSE US.

"WHEN WE MET IT WAS ALWAYS FAR FROM PRYING EYES, AND ALL TOO BRIEF.

WE CAN'T GO ON LIKE THIS, NALIA.

WE?

YOU MEAN THE TWO OF *US?*

I MEAN THE *GUILDS.*

I MEAN CIRESS ITSELF.

NO ONE GUILD IS STRONG ENOUGH TO TAKE POWER, AND THIS SQUABBLING WILL BE THE DOOM OF US ALL.

UNLESS *SOMETHING* UNITES US.

BE CAUTIOUS IN WHAT YOU WISH FOR, ALAIN.

BUT HOW LONG CAN WE GO ON *PRETENDING,* KEEPING THE WORLD AT BAY LIKE THIS?

I DON'T KNOW.

AS LONG AS WE *HAVE* TO?

"WHAT OUR LOVE LACKED IN *TIME* WE OVERCAME WITH INTENSITY.

"YET WE WOULD HAVE MADE *MORE* OF OUR INTERLUDES...

"...HAD WE KNOWN OF THE MALIGN PRESENCE UPON OUR THIRD MOON, REGARDING OUR WORLD WITH A BALEFUL EYE.

THRUNCH

THRUNCH

RRRRR

RRRRR

YES.

THIS WILL DO NICELY.

DO WHAT YOU *MUST*...

...FOR *FAILURE* DOOMS ALL CIRESS!

"WE HAD ENGAGED IN YET ANOTHER BATTLE, NOUVEAU AND TAROC JOINED AGAINST DARK MAGI AND SHAMAN IN THE RUINS OF THE TEMPLE AT ANGDU XEN.

"WE WARRED SURROUNDED BY THE CRUMBLING STONES OF A ONCE-GRAND STRUCTURE. THE SYMBOLISM WAS NOT LOST UPON ME.

"IF THE GUILDS COULD FIND NO WAY TO TURN FROM THE PATH OF SELF-DESTRUCTION WE TROD...

"...RUINS AWAITED *ALL* OF US.

"MUCH OF THE CONFLICT WAS ROOTED IN THE AGE-OLD ANIMOSITY BETWEEN NOUVEAU AND DARK MAGI.

"WE SHARE BORDERS, YET OUR MAGICS COULD NOT BE MORE AT ODDS.

"*WE* DRAW FROM THE LIGHT...

CHAMP

"...WHILE THEY BASE THEIR POWER UPON BLOOD AND DARKNESS.

GAH!

SHING

THE DARK MAGI WILL *RULE* THIS WORLD!

"OURS WAS A HATRED SO ANCIENT AND STRONG...

YOU DAMNED FOOL, THERE WON'T BE A WORLD *LEFT* TO RULE!

"...THAT IT REDUCED TWO OF THE MOST POWERFUL MAGES ON THE PLANET TO *ANIMALS* SQUABBLING IN THE DUST.

NOUVEAU WON'T BE LEFT TO—

Whuh?

FTCH

WHAT HAVE YOU *DONE*, MAGUS?

"EACH OF US HAD TRUCKED WITH DEMONS, SPIRITS OF THE AIR, ALL MANNER OF BEINGS FROM DIMENSIONS FAR REMOVED FROM OUR OWN.

"WE REGULARLY DEALT WITH CREATURES OF SUCH EVIL THEY WOULD RIP THE SOULS FROM THE UNPROTECTED SIMPLY TO SEE THEM SHRIVEL AND DIE.

"YET *NONE* OF US, NOT IN ALL OUR MYRIAD SORCEROUS EXPERIENCES...

NOTHING.

NOTHING.

THIS IS NOT MY DOING.

"...HAD EVER COME INTO CONTACT WITH ANYTHING REMOTELY LIKE *HER*.

WELL.

THIS *IS* A DREARY LITTLE SPECK.

YOU *SEE?*

DO YOU BELIEVE ME *NOW?*

WHATEVER YOU ARE, *RETURN* WHENCE YOU CAME!

Ah.

THIS IS WHAT YOU DEEM *MAGIC.*

MERELY POWER IN YET ANOTHER FORM.

LET ME SHOW YOU WHAT *POWER* TRULY IS.

GyAAH!

MASTER?

MASTER MINDOKA?

nnngh

ANY ONE *ELSE* CARE TO TRY?

NO?

I TAKE IT YOU ARE THIS WORLD'S *LEADERS.*

WE ARE.

WHO ARE *YOU?*

I AM **ANIMORA.** I AM YOUR **MASTER.**

I'VE LOOKED DOWN FROM YOUR MOON AND *WATCHED* YOUR LITTLE BLUE PLANET. IT SITS AT A NEXUS WHERE THE UNIVERSE'S ENERGIES CONVERGE.

I'LL MAKE *USE* OF ALL THE POWER AND POTENTIAL THAT SWIRLS HERE.

I'VE BEEN *SO LONG* RECOUPING MY STRENGTH AFTER MY BANISHMENT. NOW YOUR WORLD WILL SERVE AS MY *BATTERY...*

...PAVING A WAY HOME FOR ME TO EXACT MY *REVENGE* UPON THOSE WHO EXILED ME.

BUT WHY HAVE YOU COME TO CIRESS?

WHAT DO YOU *WANT?*

CIRESS IS WHAT I WANT.

I'LL *TAKE IT* IF YOU FORCE ME, BUT I'D PREFER TO AVOID EXPENDING ENERGIES BETTER SPENT ELSEWHERE.

MAKE NO MISTAKE, THOUGH. THIS PLANET IS MINE. TURN IT OVER TO ME...

...OR I'LL DESTROY EVERY LIVING THING ON IT.

YOU HAVE *ONE DAY* TO MAKE YOUR DECISION.

WE NEED TO SUMMON THE OTHER MASTERS...

"AND SO WE MET, GATHERING AMONG THE RUINS...

"...EIGHT PEOPLE WHO OTHERWISE WOULDN'T BE IN THE SAME PLACE EXCEPT TO *KILL* ONE ANOTHER.

WHAT ASSURANCE DO WE HAVE THAT THIS ISN'T A *TRICK*?

YOU FOUR COULD HAVE FORMED A SECRET ALLIANCE AND CONCOCTED THIS TALE TO LURE US IN.

YOU SEE PLOTS WITHIN PLOTS, AUNMAI, AS ALWAYS. TELL ME...

...DOES *HE* LOOK LIKE A TRICK?

MY INJURIES SHOULD BE ALL THE PROOF YOU REQUIRE.

I HAVE ATTESTED TO THE TALE AS WELL.

DO *ANY* OF YOU BELIEVE I WOULD MAKE PEACE WITH LeCAVALIER IF ANYTHING LESS THAN OUR *WORLD* WERE AT STAKE?

YOURS IS A GUILD *FOUNDED* UPON LIES, MAGUS. YET NOW YOU EXPECT US TO TAKE YOU AT YOUR WORD?

HEROTUS ECHOES *MY* SUSPICIONS. THIS SMACKS OF A CONSPIRACY.

EVERYTHING SMACKS OF A CONSPIRACY TO YOU, CRONE! JUST *ONCE* CAN'T YOU—

ENOUGH!

WHAT IS IT YOU *WANT*?

TO CONTINUE THIS POINTLESS BICKERING?

OR TO GIVE CIRESS A CHANCE OF ***SURVIVAL*** BY PUTTING ***ASIDE*** YOUR PETTY DIFFERENCES?

SUCH A THING HAS ***NEVER*** HAPPENED.

IT MUST HAPPEN...

...OR WE DAMN THE VERY WORLD WE ARE SUPPOSED TO PROTECT.

WE MASTERS MUST POOL OUR STRENGTHS IF ANIMORA IS TO BE DEFEATED.

I SUSPECT SHE'S TOO POWERFUL TO BE ***DESTROYED***...

...BUT I BELIEVE WE COULD ***CAGE*** HER.

A SPELL OF IMPRISONMENT? WHERE WOULD WE LAY IT?

WHERE ANIMORA LEAST EXPECTS IT.

WE COULD OPEN A PORTAL TO A ***NULL VOID***. EVEN ***SHE*** COULDN'T ESCAPE FROM THAT.

BUT WE WOULD NEED A ***SPELL ANCHOR*** TO BE CERTAIN OF SUCCESS.

HE'S RIGHT. ONE OF US WOULD HAVE TO BE ***WITHIN*** THE TRAP, TO SEE THAT IT'S SPRUNG PROPERLY.

THAT'S A ***SUICIDE*** ERRAND.

WHAT OTHER CHOICE IS THERE? IF ***ONE*** OF US MUST BE SACRIFICED SO CIRESS MAY LIVE, SO BE IT.

BUT ***WHICH*** ONE?

WE DECIDE BY *CHANCE*.

EIGHT CARDS, THE BACKS IDENTICAL.

ON THE FACE, SEVEN SAFE CARDS AND ONE DEATH'S HEAD.

WHOEVER CHOOSES THE DEATH'S HEAD...

...SERVES AS THE SPELL ANCHOR.

MAGUS?

CARE TO DRAW FIRST?

HOW DO WE KNOW YOU WON'T *CHANGE* THE CARDS TO PROTECT YOURSELF?

BECAUSE I *TELL YOU* I WON'T. OUR *TRUST* IN ONE ANOTHER BEGINS HERE.

SAFE.

SAFE.

SAFE.

SAFE.

SAFE.

SAFE.

TWO LEFT.

YOU CHOOSE, NALIA.

THEY'RE MY CARDS, ALAIN.

I'LL TAKE THE ONE THAT REMAINS.

SAFE?

THE DEATH'S HEAD.

THEN IT'S DECIDED.

THE DUTY FALLS TO YOU.

NALIA, WHY?

IT SEEMS SO *DIM*...

...A LIGHT FADING AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL.

THERE ARE MOMENTS I CAN HARDLY REMEMBER IT.

BUT THERE WAS A TIME I *WASN'T* SHACKLED TO THIS HIDEOUS SHELL.

ONCE I WAS BEAUTIFUL.

I WAS POWERFUL.

I WAS *PURSUED*.

NOW I'M REDUCED TO LISTENING TO THE ECHOES OF MY OWN VOICE AND FORGING A ***REMINDER*** SO I CAN RECALL ALL THAT I WAS.

ALL THAT I *WAS*.

AND WHEN I RETURN TO ELYSIA...

...ALL THAT I WILL BE ***AGAIN***.

KRAAA

THIS IS YOUR ANSWER THEN?

NO...

...THIS IS OUR ANSWER.

"*SURPRISE* WORKED TO OUR ADVANTAGE. WE HAD THAT MUCH, AT LEAST.

"ANIMORA NEVER EXPECTED US TO FIGHT. WE WERE INSIGNIFICANT TO HER...

"...CREATURES SO FAR BELOW HER STATION THAT SHE NEVER CONSIDERED US ANY SORT OF THREAT.

"IN HER MIND, HOW COULD WE PRESUME TO MATCH HER, MUCH LESS DEFEAT HER?

"WHICH WAS *TRUE*, OF COURSE.

"WE WERE THE MOST POWERFUL BEINGS UPON OUR WORLD, MASTER SORCERERS ALL.

"TOGETHER WE UNLEASHED A MAGICAL ONSLAUGHT AS HAD NEVER BEEN SEEN...

"...YET OUR COMBINED MIGHT WAS LITTLE MORE THAN A NUISANCE TO HER.

"WE PRESSED OUR ATTACK, MOMENTARILY FLUSH WITH INITIAL SUCCESS...

"...AND ANIMORA RECOVERED AS IF WE'D BARELY STUNG HER.

"IT WAS THE FIRST TIME THE MAJOR GUILDS HAD EVER BEEN UNITED IN *ANYTHING*.

"WE WERE UNITED IN UTTER *DEFEAT*.

"ONE AFTER ANOTHER WE ATTACKED.

"AND ONE AFTER ANOTHER...

"...WE *FELL*, LIKE PETALS BEFORE A GALE.

"WE HAD NO HOPE OF STANDING AGAINST HER.

"...NOTHING MORE THAN A DIVERSION.

"BUT THAT WAS NEVER OUR INTENT. WE WERE MERE FODDER...

WAIT.

THERE SHOULD BE *EIGHT* OF YOU.

WHERE'S THE *OTHER?*

YOU THOUGHT YOU COULD HIDE HERE?!

THE OTHERS WERE TO DISTRACT ME WHILE *YOU* CONCEALED YOURSELF IN THE DEPTHS OF MY PALACE?

THE ONLY THING YOU'VE PUT IN MOTION IS YOUR OWN *DEMISE!*

I'LL SNUFF OUT *THEIR* LIVES LATER...

...*YOURS* I'LL TAKE NOW!

UMF!

WHATEVER YOU HOPED THIS PLOY WOULD ACCOMPLISH WILL *NEVER* COME TO PASS.

⇒GHK⇐

IT ALREADY *HAS.*

WHAT...

...WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

WHAT'S HAPPENING?!

YOU'RE TRAPPED. WE *BOTH* ARE.

THE CARDS HAVE FORMED A BARRIER YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO BREAK.

NOT *NEARLY* IN TIME.

YOU'RE FOOL ENOUGH TO BELIEVE YOU CAN *KEEP* ME HERE?

NO...

...IT WAS NEVER OUR INTENTION TO KEEP YOU HERE.

YOU'LL BE SENT ELSEWHERE...

...SOMEPLACE YOU CAN DO NO FURTHER HARM.

YOU'RE *NOTHING* TO ME. THE POWER I COMMAND—

THE RITUAL NOT ONLY ENTRAPS YOU...

...IT OPENS THE WAY FOR US TO *USURP* YOUR POWER.

NO!

I WON'T BE *DRAINED* AND **BANISHED** AGAIN!

THE *CHOICE* IS NOT YOURS.

EYAAAAGH!

"WE SIPHONED ANIMORA'S POWER, AND THOUGH WE WERE ***THEN*** UNAWARE OF IT...

"...THE ENERGIES WE ABSORBED WOULD ALLOW THE SEVEN OF US TO LIVE ON AS ***SPIRITS*** ONCE OUR NATURAL LIVES ENDED.

"BUT ETERNAL LIFE IS NOT WITHOUT A PRICE.

"ANIMORA WAS DRAWN INTO THE NULL VOID, A DIMENSION OF ALL-CONSUMING ***NOTHINGNESS.***

"NO LIGHT.

"NO SOUND.

"WE REMAINED SAFE BEHIND OUR BARRIER, OF COURSE, REDUCED TO HELPLESSLY WATCHING THE SPECTACLE.

"IT WAS NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE TO HEAR ANYTHING OVER THE VORTEX'S HOWL.

"I KNOW I SCREAMED NALIA'S NAME.

"I LIKE TO THINK SHE SAID ***MINE.***

"AND THEN SHE WAS GONE."

CIRESS IS PRESERVED.

WE'VE TRIUMPHED!

YES...

...WE'VE TRIUMPHED.

THAT'S SO TRAGIC...

...SO HORRIBLY *SAD*.

SHE WAS NEVER RESCUED?

THERE WAS NO WAY TO EVEN ATTEMPT IT.

AS FAR AS THE PUBLIC WAS CONCERNED, NALIA WAS A SIMPLE CASUALTY.

THE TAROC GUILD EVENTUALLY FADED AWAY.

WE MASTERS PAINTED OURSELVES AS HEROES SO THE PEOPLE WOULD ACCEPT US AS A COLLECTIVE REGIME PRESIDING OVER CIRESS.

THAT SOUNDS FAMILIAR.

DOESN'T IT.

THERE'S NOT MUCH IN THERE, 'ELLE, BUT LOOK IF YOU LIKE.

ALAIN, THANK YOU FOR TELLING ME. IT MUST BE A PAINFUL MEMORY.

IT'S NOT A TALE I CARE TO VISIT OFTEN. BUT I TELL IT TO YOU IN HOPES YOU'LL LEARN THE LESSON FROM IT.

Hmm.

THE LESSON?

...down here, sweetheart.

You dropped this outta the book.

Hey...

WE DO WHAT WE MUST...

*...KNOWING EVERY VICTORY COMES WITH A **SACRIFICE**.*

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NOW *THAT'S* A NICE PIECE OF WORK.

I MEAN THE PICTURE, NOT THE...

...WELL, YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN, THIERRY.

I KNOW. KIND OF A SHAME. DOUBT I'LL EVER SEE GISELLE *OR* HER SISTER AGAIN.

I GOT DRAWN INTO WHATEVER WAS GOING ON WITH THEM, THEN...

...*NOTHING*. PROBABLY BETTER OFF THAT WAY.

SO WHAT'S NEW WITH YOU, RICK?

SAME OLD SAME OLD. JUST ANOTHER NIGHT WITH THE USUAL CROWD.

YOU KNOW, *GISELLE* USED TO BE A REGULAR IN HERE, TOO. BUT IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE I'VE SEEN HER.

ALWAYS SEEMED A LITTLE FLIGHTY, THOUGH.

STILL, WOULD'VE BEEN NICE TO GET TO KNOW HER.

THERE ARE MORE SPRITES IN THE ETHER, THIERRY.

THAT'S WHAT THEY SAY.

SHOULD'VE REALIZED SOMEONE LIKE HER AND SOMEONE LIKE ME DIDN'T STAND MUCH CHANCE OF CONNECTING.

I GUESS WE'LL ALWAYS HAVE EACH OTHER, RIGHT ALPHONSE?

Oh WELL...

...I'LL JUST FIND ANOTHER SUBJECT TO PAINT.

THIERRY?

I WAS HOPING I'D FIND YOU...

ALL GONE

BRF?

...HERE?!

GISELLE!

WHOOP.

SPLOSH

I'M SORRY...

...I'M *SO* SORRY...

...HERE, LET ME, I CAN TAKE CARE OF THAT...

...uh...

...I THOUGHT I COULD TAKE CARE OF...

...BUT MAYBE I...

...um...

IT'S OKAY, I DON'T NEED THAT.

SEE? GOOD AS NEW.

DON'T GIVE IT A SECOND THOUGHT.

SO...

...PRETTY BIG CROWD TONIGHT.

YEAH, THIS PLACE HAS REALLY BECOME A HANGOUT.

SUCH A GOOD BOY, AREN'T YOU? *ALPHONSE*, ISN'T IT?

YOU REMEMBERED. YOU HAVE A SQUIT, RIGHT? LEFT IT AT HOME?

NO, NOT AT HOME, EXACTLY.

THAT'S WHY I CAME, TRUTHFULLY— TO *APOLOGIZE*.

YOU WERE SO NICE TO ME, YOU TRIED TO LOOK AFTER ME, AND I DIDN'T...WELL, I DIDN'T TAKE THE TIME TO RETURN YOUR KINDNESS.

THERE WERE REASONS, BUT THAT'S NO EXCUSE. FOR WHATEVER IT'S WORTH...

...I'M SORRY.

APOLOGY ACCEPTED THEN.
WHAT ABOUT THAT GUY YOU WERE WITH? DARROW?
THAT DIDN'T WORK OUT. HE TURNED OUT TO BE...
...uh, TOO OLD FOR ME.
LOOK, THIERRY, I KNOW YOU HAVE NO REASON TO EVEN TALK TO ME, MUCH LESS BE MY FRIEND...
...OR ANYTHING ELSE...
...BUT I WAS HOPING WE COULD START FROM SCRATCH AND SEE WHERE THINGS GO.
YOU SEEM LIKE SUCH A NICE GUY, AND TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH, I'VE HAD MY SHARE OF PROBLEMS *FINDING* NICE GUYS.
OKAY...
...LOOK, DON'T TAKE THIS THE WRONG WAY, AND I'M NOT ASKING FOR AN EXPLANATION, BUT FOR WHATEVER REASON YOU *DID* ACT PRETTY WEIRD.
HOW CAN I BE SURE THAT'S NOT GOING TO HAPPEN AGAIN?
Ah.
THAT.
TO BE HONEST, I CAN'T GUARANTEE THINGS WON'T GET... ***WEIRD***...ONCE IN A WHILE.
BECAUSE OF ***THIS.*** YOU WERE THERE JUST AFTER I GOT IT, REMEMBER?
RIGHT, BUT...WHAT IS IT?

I'M STILL NOT SURE WHERE IT CAME FROM, AND IT'S REALLY COMPLICATED MY LIFE.

BUT I'VE ACCEPTED IT AND I'M LEARNING TO LIVE WITH IT.

"LIVE WITH IT?" I'M NOT SURE WHAT THAT MEANS.

DOES IT HAVE SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE NOUVEAU CATHEDRAL GETTING DESTROYED? I KNOW YOUR SISTER WAS NAMED GUILD MASTER.

THAT'S PART OF IT, BUT THERE'S MORE. IT'S—

IT WOULD BE EASIER FOR ME TO ***SHOW*** YOU. WOULD YOU MIND GOING SOMEWHERE WITH ME?

RIGHT NOW?

SURE... I GUESS SO. CAN ALPHONSE COME?

ALPHONSE CAN ***ABSOLUTELY*** COME.

SO WHERE ARE WE GOING?

THE MOON.

WELCOME TO THE TANTRIC CATHEDRAL, GUILD MASTER VILLARD.

IF I CAN BE OF SERVICE TO YOU IN *ANY* WAY, PLEASE DON'T HESITATE TO ASK.

Uh, NO... I'M FINE, THANKS.

FINE.

BUT IF I THINK OF ANYTHING I'LL... BE SURE TO LET YOU KNOW.

PLEASE DO.

FOLLOW ME.

ALL THE OTHER MASTERS HAVE ARRIVED AND AWAIT YOU WITHIN THE INNER SANCTUM.

WE OF THE TANTRIC GUILD FIND IT BEST WHEN THERE IS A WILLINGNESS TO CONJOIN FROM ALL PARTIES INVOLVED.

I HOPE YOUR DISCUSSIONS ARE FRUITFUL.

THANK YOU, I HOPE SO AS WELL.

FASHIONABLY LATE, I SEE.

FASHIONABLY *LOST,* VASHUA...

...BUT ONLY BRIEFLY.

THEN I'M GLAD YOU FOUND YOUR WAY. WE SHOULD BEGIN.

SERVERS ARE DISMISSED.

PLEASE LEAVE US.

ALL OF YOUR ACOLYTES SEEM TO BE SUCH...

...HEALTHY...

...SPECIMENS.

WE OF THE TANTRIC TAKE ***PRIDE*** IN OUR ***OWN*** BODIES AND ***PLEASURE*** IN THOSE OF OTHERS.

OBVIOUSLY.

THANK YOU FOR ALLOWING THIS TO TAKE PLACE HERE. THE NOUVEAU CATHEDRAL IS STILL A PILE OF RUBBLE UNFORTUNATELY.

THIS WAS THE ONLY SITE UPON WHICH ALL SEVEN OF US COULD AGREE.

PLEASE, SIT.

A SHREWD TACTIC, MAKING US ***WAIT*** FOR YOU, GENEVIEVE. PERHAPS YOU HAVE THE MAKINGS OF A GUILD MASTER AFTER ALL.

AND PERHAPS YOU ASCRIBE TO ME DUPLICITY TO WHICH ***YOU*** WOULD BE MORE PRONE, MAGUS.

WE'RE ALL AWARE OF WHY WE'RE HERE.

SO YOU CAN FORCE AN UNPALATABLE COMPROMISE DOWN OUR THROATS.

CALL IT WHATEVER YOU LIKE. THE SITUATION *IS* WHAT IT IS.

DESPITE YOUR EFFORTS, MY SISTER RETAINS THE ETERNAL SPIRITS. AND IT WILL *REMAIN* SO...

...BUT THE *POPULATION* NEED NOT KNOW.

THE PEOPLE ARE IGNORANT THAT EACH OF US IS AN EMPTY VESSEL. THEY WON'T KNOW THE TRUTH...

...BECAUSE THEY *CAN'T* KNOW THE TRUTH. THE SECRET MUST NEVER BE REVEALED, AND WE SEVEN MUST COMPEL EACH OTHER TO KEEP IT.

WHAT RIGHT HAVE *YOU* TO MAKE DEMANDS?!

YOU ACT AS IF YOU'RE IN A POSITION TO *DICTATE,* RATHER THAN BEING ONE WHO IS BARELY AN EQUAL!

AN *EQUAL?* I SPEAK ON BEHALF OF MYSELF AS WELL AS MY SISTER. AND I BELIEVE WE'VE ALREADY ESTABLISHED SHE WIELDS MORE POWER THAN ALL OF US *COMBINED.*

YOU'LL OBEY *THIS* AGREEMENT JUST AS YOU'LL OBEY THE TRUCE YOU MADE WITH GISELLE BECAUSE YOU'VE NO OTHER CHOICE.

WE'RE JOINED IN THIS RUSE BY OUR OWN CULPABILITY. IF ONE LINK BREAKS, WE ALL SUFFER.

THERE WILL BE NO FURTHER ATTEMPTS AGAINST GISELLE. MY SISTER WILL MAKE NO MOVE AGAINST YOU, NOR WILL SHE REVEAL THE SECRET WE SHARE.

I WISH TO POSSESS MY GUILD'S ETERNAL SPIRIT JUST AS ALL OF YOU DO. BUT THAT SEEMS UNLIKELY TO EVER HAPPEN.

IT *IS* TIME WE DEVOTED OURSELVES TO RULING OUR DOMAINS RATHER THAN THIS INCESSANT SQUABBLING.

PARTICULARLY NOW, WHILE WE CAN TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE POPULAR SUPPORT WE REAPED FROM ANIMORA'S DEFEAT.

THEN WE'RE BOUND TOGETHER IN THIS?

MONDRU?

OF COURSE.

VASHUA?

YES.

ATYAAH?

YES.

ZAI?

AGREED.

YINMA?

WHAT OTHER OPTION IS LEFT?

MAGUS?

YES, DAMN YOU.

YES.

GOOD.

HATE YOU? NO, HE DOESN'T HATE YOU.

Whoops, here she comes.

SO THIS IS IT.

Uh, THIERRY? YOU OKAY?

IS THIS...

...um...

...IS THIS WHAT I *THINK* THIS IS?

THE SANCTUM OF MASTERS?

YES.

WELL, ACTUALLY, IT DOESN'T BELONG TO THE MASTERS ANYMORE. IT'S MINE NOW.

TRUTHFULLY, IT WASN'T EVEN THEIRS. IT ORIGINALLY BELONGED TO ANIMORA.

AND IT'S...

...YOURS.

RIGHT. *MINE.*

YOURS.

OKAY. BY THE WAY, UNIQUE DRESS.

THANKS.

THESE ARE KIND OF MY *WORK CLOTHES.*

ALPHONSE, DON'T START *THAT* AGAIN. IT'S JUST A SQUIT.

YOU'D *THINK* SO.

GISELLE, ARE YOU GOING TO TELL ME WHAT'S *REALLY* GOING ON?

FROM THE BEGINNING?

YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND, I WAS ***NEVER*** INTERESTED IN MAGIC. THAT WAS MY SISTER'S THING. I WAS A LOT MORE CONCERNED WITH WHERE THE NEXT PARTY WAS.

WHEN GEN WAS PICKED TO BE THE NEXT NOUVEAU GUILD MASTER, I WAS GLAD FOR HER. SHE'D WORKED HER WHOLE LIFE FOR THAT CHANCE. BUT IT DIDN'T MEAN ANYTHING TO ME.

DURING HER RITE OF ASCENSION SOMEONE CONGRATULATED ME, JUST SOME GUY WHO SHOOK MY HAND. BUT I GUESS HE DID MORE THAN THAT...

...BECAUSE NOT LONG AFTER, THIS ***MARK*** APPEARED ON MY PALM. AND SOMEHOW...

...THIS PART YOU HAVE TO KEEP SECRET...

...SOMEHOW IT ATTRACTED ALL THE ETERNAL SPIRITS INTO ME. THAT WAS RIGHT BEFORE YOU SAW ME BY THAT FOUNTAIN, REMEMBER?

THE SPIRITS ARE STILL THERE, IT'S LIKE I COULDN'T GET RID OF THEM IF I WANTED TO.

WHICH MEANS I'VE GOT ACCESS TO MORE MAGICAL POWER THAN ANYONE.

EVER.

YOU CAN IMAGINE GEN WAS LESS THAN HAPPY WITH ME, BUT SHE WAS THE LEAST OF MY PROBLEMS.

I HAD TO DEAL WITH THE ***OTHER*** GUILD MASTERS, THAT SLIMEBALL DARROW, ANIMORA.

ALL THAT'S ***OVER*** NOW, EVERYTHING'S PRETTY MUCH BACK TO NORMAL...

...*NORMAL* MEANING I'M SUPPOSED TO BE THE MAGICAL PROTECTOR OF CIRESS.

LOOK, IF THIS IS TOO WEIRD FOR YOU, IT'S OKAY.

I'LL BRING YOU BACK TO JAZZRAT'S OR WHEREVER YOU WANT TO GO.

NO, I THINK I'M OKAY WITH IT. I *THINK*.

THEN YOU'LL *STAY* A LITTLE WHILE?

SURE, I CAN'T WAIT TO SEE WHAT HAPPENS NEXT.

SORRY THE PLACE IS SUCH A MESS. MY APARTMENT'S PROBABLY A LITTLE WORSE, IF YOU CAN BELIEVE IT.

I REALLY NEED TO CLEAN ALL THIS UP AND FIGURE OUT WHAT'S HERE, BUT...

...WELL, TIDINESS WAS NEVER MY FORTÉ.

TRUTHFULLY, I HAVEN'T EVEN EXPLORED MOST OF IT. WANT TO HAVE A LOOK AROUND WITH ME?

WITH THE MAGICAL PROTECTOR OF CIRESS TO KEEP ME SAFE...

...HOW CAN I REFUSE?

WE'RE GOING FOR A WALK. YOU COMING?

Nah, too much effort. If it's all the same to you, I'll stay here and make Alphonse nervous.

SUIT YOURSELF.

THE SQUIT.
TALKS.
I'VE GOTTEN USED TO IT.
BELIEVE ME, WITH EVERYTHING ELSE THAT'S HAPPENED, A TALKING SQUIT DOESN'T SEEM LIKE THAT BIG A DEAL ANYMORE.
HANG ON, I SHOULD AT LEAST TIDY THIS UP.
THIS MAGIC STUFF *DOES* HAVE ITS USES.

SKRAKAKRAX

COULDN'T YOU JUST REBUILD THE NOUVEAU CATHEDRAL LIKE THAT?
PROBABLY...
...BUT I KNOW THAT'S SOMETHING GEN WANTS TO TAKE CARE OF HERSELF.
SHE SEEMS NICE, YOUR SISTER. IT'S OBVIOUS HOW MUCH SHE CARES ABOUT YOU.
GEN PRACTICALLY RAISED ME.
OUR RELATIONSHIP'S HAD ITS ROCKY PATCHES, BUT NOW IT'S THE BEST IT'S *EVER* BEEN.

WOW.

WHAT IS IT?

WHO IS IT?

I'M NOT SURE. LIKE I SAID, I REALLY HAVEN'T HAD MUCH CHANCE TO EXPLORE THIS PLACE.

BUT IT DOESN'T SEEM LIKE SOMETHING ANY OF THE MASTERS WOULD'VE HAD. YOU THINK MAYBE IT WAS ANIMORA'S?

IT'S BEAUTIFUL, WHOEVER IT BELONGED TO. THE CRAFT, THE AESTHETIC...

...EVERYTHING.

IT'S AN ARTISTIC EXPRESSION, NOT A MAGICAL ONE, YOU KNOW?

THAT'S REALLY WHY I BECAME AN ARTIST, SO I COULD CREATE ***WITHOUT*** MAGIC.

IT'S SO EASY TO CAST A SPELL OR LOOK UP AN INCANTATION, BUT I THINK THERE'S A FEELING OF...

...I DUNNO, ***ACCOMPLISHMENT,*** WHEN YOU DO SOMETHING YOURSELF. BY HAND.

LISTEN TO ***ME*** GOING ON. SORRY, I DON'T MEAN TO BORE YOU.

NO, NOT AT ALL.

DO YOU HAVE ANY OF YOUR WORK IN THERE?

ARE YOU ASKING...

...YOU MEAN YOU WANT TO ***SEE*** SOME?

OKAY, BUT THIS IS JUST A SKETCHBOOK, PEOPLE I'VE SEEN AROUND JAZZRAT'S.

I DID THEM FOR MYSELF, SO DON'T EXPECT TOO MUCH.

WHY ARE YOU APOLOGIZING?

THEY'RE ***WONDERFUL.***

Oh.

OOPS.

Uh...I WASN'T REALLY THINKING ABOUT THAT BEING IN THERE. I WAS SKETCHING FROM MEMORY.

I HOPE YOU'RE NOT *TOO* OFFENDED?

OFFENDED?

I'M FLATTERED.

WELL, IN THAT CASE...

...I'M GLAD YOU LIKED IT.

I'M GLAD YOU DREW IT.

THIERRY, I'M GLAD YOU'RE *HERE*.

Come back here!

I was KIDDING!

I don't REALLY eat gorks...

...they're too stringy.

FTUMP

Oops...

...THIS can't be good.

SO FRAGILE.

RECONSTRUCTION

Ron Marz • Writer
Fabrizio Fiorentino • Pencils
Drew Geraci • Inks
Jason Lambert • Colors
Troy Peteri • Letters

FOR MORE THAN FIVE HUNDRED YEARS THE CATHEDRAL STOOD ON THIS GROUND. AND TO SEE IT REDUCED TO *THIS*...

...SUCH A TRAGEDY.

JULIAN?

WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

I PRESUME THE SAME AS YOU, GUILD MASTER VILLARD.

REMINISCING.

VISITING GHOSTS.

I'VE BEEN GUILD MASTER FOR LESS THAN A FORTNIGHT, AND THIS RUBBLE IS MY LEGACY.

ANIMORA'S *DEFEAT* IS YOUR LEGACY.

BUT SO MUCH WAS *LOST*, JULIAN. THE CATHEDRAL WAS MORE THAN OUR HOME...

...IT WAS A SYMBOL.

EVEN THE GARDEN IS GONE.

IT WAS MORTAR AND STONES.

WE'LL BUILD ANOTHER.

SEEDS BEFORE OAKS, GENEVIEVE.

YOUR WISDOM ALWAYS HELPED ME IN MY STUDIES, JULIAN.

IT'S A COMFORT TO KNOW I CAN STILL COUNT ON IT NOW.

SEEDS BEFORE OAKS.

FORZE

MAYBE THIS WASN'T SUCH A GOOD IDEA AFTER ALL.

HELLO?

IS ANYONE HERE?

VISITOR

BRAVE TO HAVE COME

WHAT BRINGS HER?

FROM THE MATERIAL PLANE

OFFERING A BARGAIN?

APPROACHING CAUTIOUSLY

WELL, WELL...

...ONE OF THE *NOUVEAU* IF I'M NOT MISTAKEN?

WHY DOES ONE OF THE GUILD ELITE OF CIRESS PAY A VISIT TO *OUR* HUMBLE PLANE?

I'M *MASTER* OF THE NOUVEAU GUILD, NOT SIMPLY AN ADHERENT.

THEN WHY DOES A GUILD *MASTER* PAY A VISIT?

ONLY THOSE WITH LITTLE CHOICE ACTUALLY COME TO THE EQUAR ARCHITECTS.

I HAVE NEED OF WHAT YOU PROVIDE. NOUVEAU'S CATHEDRAL WAS DESTROYED.

I WISH TO CONSTRUCT A NEW ONE WITHOUT DRAINING THE GUILD'S RESOURCES.

I AM CHIEF ARCHITECT OF THE ***CONSTRUCTION.***

MY PEOPLE ARE DESIGNERS. ***BUILDERS.*** WHAT YOU SEE AROUND YOU IS THE REFLECTION OF ALL THAT WE ARE.

WE ARE CREATORS OF GEOMETRIC PERFECTION. THIS IS ***WHO*** WE ARE...

...AND WHAT WE ARE ABLE TO ***OFFER.*** BUT IT DOES NOT COME CHEAPLY.

I ASK WHAT YOU OFFER IN RETURN. WE ARE NOT KNOWN FOR BEING A...

...***CHARITABLE...***

...ORGANIZATION.

OH, I THINK I MIGHT HAVE SOMETHING THAT YOU'LL FIND OF INTEREST.

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Um, let's see...

"It was the gork's fault, I swear I had nothing to do with it."

No, she'll see right through that.

"How was I to know it was a MAGIC crystal skull and not just the regular kind?"

Nope, pleading ignorance won't get me off the hook.

"I was drunk."

Well, that has possibilities.

Or maybe I'll just keep my mouth shut...

.. since she's bound to find out pretty soon anyway.

I'M GLAD YOU LIKED THE SKETCH, GISELLE. I JUST DREW IT FROM MEMORY, SO...

...YOU KNOW, IT'S PROBABLY NOT PERFECT.

YOU COULD ALWAYS ***POSE*** FOR ME SO I CAN GET IT RIGHT. THE OFFER I MADE WHEN WE MET IS STILL GOOD.

SOUNDS LIKE IT MIGHT BE FUN...

...BUT IT ALSO SOUNDS SUSPICIOUSLY LIKE AN EXCUSE FOR YOU TO GET ME ***ALONE,*** THIERRY.

WE'RE ALREADY ALONE, AREN'T WE?

I'M A ***NICE*** GUY, REMEMBER? I WOULDN'T DO SOMETHING LIKE THAT...

PROMISE

AHEM!

GEN

I HOPE I'M NOT INTERRUPTING...

..ANYTHING.

WHO?

US?

NO, OF COURSE NOT. I...YOU KNOW, I'M JUST SURPRISED. I WASN'T EXPECTING YOU, GEN.

I REALLY ONLY CAME TO SAY HI.

WHEN YOU WEREN'T AT YOUR APARTMENT I THOUGHT THIS WAS THE MOST LIKELY PLACE.

FOUND ME.

YOU REMEMBER THIERRY, RIGHT?

THIERRY CHEVALIER, MY SISTER GENEVIEVE.

HI.

NICE TO SEE YOU AGAIN.

SO...WHAT'S GOING ON?

NOTHING.

I FOUND THIERRY AT JAZZRAT'S AND WE DECIDED TO COME HERE. HE SHOWED ME SOME SKETCHES...

...AND WE WERE TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHERE THIS STATUE CAME FROM.

YOU KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT IT, GEN?

LESS THAN YOU DO, PROBABLY. I'VE ONLY BEEN HERE IN THE SANCTUM A FEW TIMES, AND ***NEVER*** IN THIS PART OF IT.

IT CERTAINLY DOESN'T LOOK LIKE ANY OF THE FORMER MASTERS.

IT'S BEAUTIFUL, WHOEVER IT IS.

AN HOUR AGO I WAS SKETCHING IN A BAR. NOW I'M ADMIRING SCULPTURE ON THE MOON. I FEEL LIKE I SHOULD PINCH MYSELF.

BELIEVE ME, YOU GET USED TO IT FASTER THAN YOU THINK.

I'M ACTUALLY GETTING TO LIKE IT, THOUGH THE WHOLE DEFENDING OUR PLANET PART WAS MAYBE A ***LITTLE*** MORE RESPONSIBILITY THAN I—

YEEP!

ALPHONSE?

YEEP! YEEP!

SKITTER!

I am ***NOT*** chasing him!

I am ***BEING*** chased!

See, I told you so.

Uh...

...DOES THIS *USUALLY* HAPPEN?

NOPE

NOT USUALLY.

Ooh, YOU ARE GONNA BE IN *SO* MUCH TROUBLE.

Meep.

SHOULDN'T ONE OF YOU... *DO* SOMETHING?

LET ME.

ALL YOURS.

ZZZT

I THINK YOU STOPPED IT...

...*WHATEVER* IT WAS.

LET'S JUST MAKE SURE.

WHERE DID IT COME FROM, GEN?

I HAVEN'T A CLUE I'VE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE IT

COULD IT HAVE FOLLOWED YOU HERE SOMEHOW?

I DON'T SEE HOW. ALL THE WARDS WE PUT IN PLACE AROUND THE MOON ARE STILL THERE.

THE ONLY ONES WHO CAN GET IN AND OUT OF HERE ARE ME AND YOU.

IT WAS LIKE A *PATCHWORK,* JUST BITS AND PIECES.

WHATEVER IT WAS, SEEMS LIKE IT'S ALL OVER...

...OR NOT.

I THINK SOMEBODY HAD BETTER GO *MEDIEVAL* ON THIS THING!

HAH!

SHANK

Huh?

FWOMP

AHH!

YOU'RE SWEET...

UFF!

...BUT STAY OUT OF THE WAY AND LEAVE THIS TO THE GIRLS, OKAY?

OOOOH

WHATEVER YOU SAY.

ANY IDEAS?

MAYBE SOME KIND OF AMBUSH LEFT BEHIND BY THE GUILD MASTERS?

POSSIBLY, BUT I DOUBT IT. IT DOESN'T EVEN STRIKE ME AS SENTIENT, IT'S MORE LIKE SOME KIND OF GOLEM.

IT'S JUST ABSORBING WHATEVER'S AROUND IT...

...MAKING ITSELF *BIGGER* ALL THE TIME.

ALL RIGHT, IF IT'S FEEDING OFF THE ARTIFACTS IN HERE...

...WE'LL JUST TAKE *IT* AWAY FROM THE ARTIFACTS.

THAT SHOULD AT LEAST STOP IT FROM GROWING.

WHAT ABOUT THE ETERNAL SPIRITS, 'ELLE? ANY WORD FROM THEM?

HEY, YOU GUYS *ARE* PRETTY QUIET.

ANY POINTERS?

HELLO?

SHRUKK

APOLOGIES FOR OUR SILENCE, GISELLE, BUT THIS CREATURE IS UNKNOWN TO ANY OF US.

WELL?

LOOKS LIKE IT'S JUST ME AND YOU.

WE DON'T DO ENOUGH THINGS TOGETHER ANYMORE ANYWAY.

SFX

SKREAKOOM

NOT BAD, 'ELLE.
ARE YOU *KIDDING,* NOT BAD? WE WIPED IT OUT! WE—

DO YOU... FEEL THAT?
I FEEL THAT.

DO YOU *SEE* THAT?
I SEE THAT...

...BUT I REALLY WISH I DIDN'T

YOU KNOW, I'M THINKING MAYBE THERE WAS A SECRET CACHE OF ARTIFACTS UNDER THE SURFACE.

YEAH, I'M...

...I'M THINKING THAT TOO.

GREAT.

THIS IS TURNING INTO A BIGGER DEBACLE THAN THE PARTY FOR MY SIXTEENTH BIRTHDAY.

MAGUS?

THE SKULL ITSELF IS WHAT CONFRONTS YOU.

WAIT, GISELLE. THE CREATURE *IS* KNOWN TO ONE OF US...

...ONE WHO WAS RESISTANT TO DIVULGE HIS KNOWLEDGE. BUT WE HAVE...CONVINCED HIM...IT WOULD BE IN HIS BEST INTEREST.

WE CREATED IT AS A DOOMSDAY DEVICE FOR CIRESS. IT WAS ONCE HOUSED IN THE VAULTS OF THE DARK MAGI CATHEDRAL.

...AN ARTIFACT SO DANGEROUS WE NEVER DARED UNLEASH IT FROM ITS NULL CASE...

...BECAUSE IT LITERALLY **FEEDS** ON MAGIC.

GEN, STOP...

"...YOU CAN'T FIGHT IT WITH *MAGIC!*"

SSSS!

EYAAH!

THERE EXISTS NO KNOWN MEANS OF OPPOSING IT.

UTILIZING MAGIC AGAINST IT—**ANY** MAGIC—WILL ONLY STRENGTHEN IT.

NOW YOU TELL ME.

I DON'T KNOW IF YOU NOTICED, BUT I HAVEN'T *GOT* MUCH BESIDES MAGIC.

WNF!

WHMP

PERHAPS YOU DO.

EVEN USING MAGIC TO PROTECT YOURSELF WILL BOLSTER THE CREATURE.

THE MARK YOU BEAR ALLOWS YOU TO DRAW UPON ENERGY THAT YOU CONVERT INTO MAGIC.

PERHAPS IT'S NOT EVEN A CONSCIOUS PROCESS.

BELIEVE ME...

...IT'S NOT.

WE DON'T TRULY UNDERSTAND THE ENERGY UPON WHICH YOUR SIGIL DRAWS, BUT WE UNDERSTAND IT'S **NOT** MAGICAL IN NATURE.

WHAT IF YOU **DIDN'T** CONVERT IT INTO MAGIC, GISELLE?

WHAT IF YOU SIMPLY ALLOWED YOURSELF TO BE A RECEPTACLE FOR THAT ENERGY...

...AND THEN RELEASED IT?

GISELLE?

GISELLE?

WHATEVER THAT WAS...

...IT WASN'T MAGIC.

THE CREATURE WAS DESTROYED BECAUSE YOU WERE ABLE TO UNLEASH A COMPLETELY **DIFFERENT** ENERGY SOURCE.

YOU'VE DONE SOMETHING UNPRECEDENTED.

I *DID*, DIDN'T I?

'ELLE!

OVER HERE!

GEN! ARE YOU—

MY BUTT'S GOING TO BE ONE BIG BRUISE, BUT I'M FINE. COME OVER HERE AND TAKE A LOOK AT THIS.

SEE? IT'S NOT ABSORBING ANYTHING AROUND IT.

I THINK IT'S DEAD

I *HOPE*.

SO WHAT DID YOU *DO*, EXACTLY?

EXACTLY?

I'M NOT REAL SURE. BUT I'M SURE IT ***WASN'T*** MAGIC. IT WAS....

...SOMETHING ELSE. LIKE RAW ENERGY CHANNELED THROUGH ***THIS*** SOMEHOW.

I DON'T KNOW WHERE IT CAME FROM, BUT IT'S NOT LIKE ANYTHING I'VE EVER FELT BEFORE

Wow, who ordered WELL DONE?

LOOK WHO DECIDES TO SHOW UP NOW THAT IT'S ***SAFE***.

YOU AND I ARE GOING TO HAVE A LONG TALK ABOUT THINGS, FURBALL.

What're you blaming me for? I'm just an innocent bystander.

SURE YOU ARE.

GISELLE!

IS EVERYBODY OKAY?

WE SURVIVED, IF THAT'S WHAT YOU MEAN.

HANG ON, THIERRY. I'LL BE RIGHT THERE.

WELL...

...LOOKS LIKE THEY'RE HITTING IT OFF JUST FINE.

Seems nice enough for an ARTIST.

Just a big COINCIDENCE. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

And if in the process Giselle learned a little bit more about her sigil...

...that's not a BAD thing, right?

LISTEN, MISTER, MAYBE YOU CAN TALK YOUR WAY AROUND GISELLE, BUT NOT ME. YOU HAD ***SOMETHING*** TO DO WITH THIS...

...AND I'M BEGINNING TO THINK YOU'VE GOT SOMETHING TO DO WITH A ***LOT*** OF THINGS. FROM NOW ON...

...I'M KEEPING MY EYE ON YOU.

Me?

RECONSTRUCTION
PART II

Ron Marz • Writer
Fabrizio Fiorentino • Pencils
Pablo Marcos • Inks
Mike Garcia • Colors
Troy Peteri & Dave Lanphear • Letters

ALL RIGHT...

...LET'S SEE IF THIS WORKS.

SEE IF *WHAT* WORKS, GENEVIEVE?

JULIAN.

I WAS HOPING I COULD ACCOMPLISH THIS IN PRIVATE, BUT...

I'M GOING TO REBUILD THE NOUVEAU CATHEDRAL. ***MYSELF.*** I THOUGHT IT WAS THE LEAST A MASTER SHOULD DO FOR HER GUILD.

SO I MADE A BARGAIN WITH THE EQUAR ARCHITECTS.

THE ARCHITECTS ARE NOT THE SORT OF BEINGS TO BE TRAFFICKED WITH LIGHTLY.

I THINK I MADE A FAIR EXCHANGE WITH THEM.

THE ARCHITECTS ARE BUILDERS WITHOUT EQUAL, BUT THERE ARE THOSE THINGS THEIR AUSTERE PLANE CAN'T OFFER.

AND IN RETURN THEY PROVIDED A SEED CONTAINING EVERYTHING NECESSARY TO RESTORE THE CATHEDRAL.

I JUST HAVE TO HELP IT ***GROW.***

AMAZING, GENEVIEVE. PERFECT IN EVERY DETAIL.

TO HAVE THE CATHEDRAL WHOLE AGAIN WILL BOLSTER THE GUILD'S MORALE...

...AND ITS CONFIDENCE IN ITS NEW MASTER.

THE GUILD CHOSE ME TO BE A LEADER. IT'S TIME I *LED*.

IT CAN'T HAVE COME CHEAPLY. WHAT *DID* YOU OFFER THE ARCHITECTS IN RETURN FOR THIS GIFT?

SOMETHING THEY COULD NEVER BUILD FOR THEMSELVES.

WHAT IS IT?

HOW DID IT COME TO BE?

PERFECTION.

THIS IS WHAT WE RECEIVED FROM THE NOUVEAU WOMAN?

AND ALL WE NEEDED TO GIVE UP WAS A MEAGER CONSTRUCTION BAUBLE?

YES...

...IT HARDLY SEEMS FAIR, DOES IT?

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MYSTIC

SEPTEMBER 11th, 2001

Ron Marz Fabrizio Fiorentino Matt Ryan Elizabeth Lewis

COINS...

...COINS FOR A POOR LOST SOUL

WON'T ANYONE TAKE PITY ON A DOWN-ON-HIS-LUCK DEMON?

DEMON MASSAGES

Ah.

YOU'RE *LATE.*

YOU KEPT ME WAITING IN A FILTHY ALLEY IN THIS DAMNABLE CITY...

...AND I DON'T APPRECIATE IT.

I'M SORRY, IT COULDN'T BE HELPED.

YOU HAVE IT?

SPLANG

OF COURSE.

DON'T FAIL ME.

I WOULDN'T DREAM OF IT.

EASILY SUMMONED, UNDETECTABLE BY ANY MAGICAL MEANS...

...IT SHOULD SUIT OUR PURPOSES PERFECTLY.

I'M SURE YOU *WOULDN'T*...

...AND I'M SURE YOU'LL MAKE CERTAIN THIS CANNOT BE TRACED TO *ME*.

SO WHAT DO WE HAVE TODAY, JULIAN?

THE MASTERS OF THREE ANCILLARY GUILDS ARE MAKING OFFICIAL VISITS.

THEY ARRIVED A SHORT TIME AGO AND I'VE ALREADY GREETED THEM.

THEY AWAIT YOU IN THE LeCAVALIER SANCTUARY.

YOU RECEIVED THE SCROLLS BRIEFING YOU AS TO THE INDIVIDUAL GUILDS AND MASTERS?

I DID.

OSTENSIBLY, OF COURSE, THEY'RE HERE TO PAY THEIR RESPECTS TO NOUVEAU'S NEW MASTER.

BUT THEY'RE CERTAINLY HOPING TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF YOUR INEXPERIENCE AND IMPROVE THEIR RESPECTIVE ALLIANCES.

THEN WE SHOULD SET A TONE.

EARLY.

WHAT WOULD YOU THINK OF A TOUR OF THE CATHEDRAL?

KLIK

LET THE MAGNIFICENCE OF THEIR SURROUNDINGS MAKE AN IMPRESSION UPON THEM?

JUST SO.

KLAK

RUMORS OF YOU *PERSONALLY* ENABLING THE RECONSTRUCTION WILL HAVE SPREAD BY NOW.

SOUNDS LIKE A FULL DAY...

THE MASTERS WILL KNOW THEY'RE DEALING WITH A FIGURE TO BE RECKONED WITH, NOT A NOVICE.

PERFECT.

...WE'D BETTER GET STARTED.

I KNOW YOU DON'T RELISH THE POLITICAL ASPECTS OF YOUR POSITION, GENEVIEVE...

...BUT THE SUPPORT OF THE ANCILLARY GUILDS IS A NECESSITY.

WE SHOULDN'T KEEP THEM WAITING.

ONLY A MOMENT LONGER, JULIAN.

"THERE'S ALWAYS TIME TO ADMIRE A BLOSSOM."

DO YOU KNOW WHO TAUGHT ME THAT WHEN I WAS JUST A GIRL?

I REMEMBER. BUT ARE YOU REMINDING ME THAT *I'M* OLD...

...OR THAT *YOU* WERE A GOOD STUDENT?

GOOD MORNING, EVERYONE.

I'M GENEVIEVE VILLARD, MASTER OF THE NOUVEAU GUILD.

WELCOME TO OUR CATHEDRAL.

WE APPRECIATE YOUR PATIENCE AND ARE FLATTERED BY YOUR VISIT.

WE OF THE NOUVEAU ARE ALWAYS PLEASED TO RECEIVE OUR FRIENDS FROM THE ANCILLARY GUILDS.

I'M TOLD YOU'VE ALREADY MET MY CHIEF OF STAFF, JULIAN DUCARD.

INDEED.

MASTER VILLARD, IT IS MY GREAT PLEASURE TO PRESENT TO YOU...

...MASTER SENGAL OF THE SAMEDI GUILD...

THANK YOU FOR RECEIVING ME.

...MASTER GUO OF THE DRAGON GUILD...

HONORED.

...AND MASTER SHAEDRA OF THE PROTEAN GUILD.

I'VE LOOKED FORWARD TO THIS MEETING FOR SOME TIME.

I TRUST WE CAN BUILD RELATIONSHIPS THAT WILL BE BENEFICIAL TO ***ALL*** OUR GUILDS. THERE ARE A GREAT MANY THINGS FOR US TO DISCUSS...

...BUT I THOUGHT WE MIGHT BEGIN WITH A TOUR OF THE CATHEDRAL.

WE WOULD BE MOST INTERESTED.

AS YOU SEE, WE'VE BEEN FORTUNATE ENOUGH TO RECOVER FROM THE DISASTER THAT CLAIMED OUR ORIGINAL STRUCTURE.

IMPRESSIVE.

I'M JUST PLEASED WE WERE ABLE TO RESTORE THE TRUE HEART OF OUR GUILD.

YOU BARGAINED WITH THE EQUAR ARCHITECTS, DID YOU NOT?

I DID.

IT WAS A... MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL AGREEMENT.

THEN YOU *DO* UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE...

...OF MAINTAINING...

...A NETWORK OF ALLIANCES.

I TRUST YOUR REGIME WILL NOT UNDERESTIMATE HOW ***USEFUL*** THE SUPPORT OF GUILDS SUCH AS OURS CAN BE IN THE POLITICAL STRUGGLES OF CIRESS.

I ASSURE YOU, MASTER GUO, I VALUE THE AID OF THE ANCILLARY GUILDS.

LET US HOPE. FOR TOO LONG THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF MY PARTICULAR GUILD HAVE BEEN TAKEN FOR GRANTED.

IT WOULD BE MOST TRAGIC IF THIS WERE TO REMAIN UNCHANGED.

KEEP AN EYE ON THAT ONE. HE CONCERNS ME.

YES, SIR.

NOUVEAU HAS A LONG TRADITION OF EQUITABLE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE ANCILLARIES.

I HAVE NO INTENTION OF CHANGING THAT POLICY.

WE THREE...

...SAMEDI, DRAGON, PROTEAN...

...COULD FORM A POWERFUL BLOCK IF ALIGNED WITH ***ANY ONE*** OF THE MAJOR GUILDS.

FIRST WE LISTEN TO WHAT NOUVEAU HAS TO OFFER.

THOUGH I ***WOULD*** BE MORE COMFORTABLE HAVING SUCH DISCUSSIONS IN A PRIVATE SETTING.

OF COURSE.

WE CAN CONTINUE OUR CONVERSATION IN THE GARDENS. THEY'VE ALWAYS BEEN MY FAVORITE ASPECT OF THE CATHEDRAL.

JULIAN, IF YOU AND THE GUARDS WOULD LEAVE US FOR A TIME?

I'M NOT SURE BEING ALONE WITH THEM IS THE WISEST CHOICE, MASTER VILLARD.

AT LEAST PERMIT *ME* TO ACCOMPANY—

THEY'RE OUR *GUESTS*, JULIAN. IT'S FINE.

I HOPE THAT'S TRUE.

NOW...

...YOU HAVE ME ALL TO YOURSELVES.

PLEASE, SPEAK CANDIDLY.

BEAR IN MIND, MASTER VILLARD, WE SPEAK NOT SOLELY FOR OURSELVES, BUT FOR *ALL* THE ANCILLARY GUILDS.

YOUR ASCENSION IS BEING VIEWED AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO CORRECT THE INJUSTICES OF THE PAST.

IT'S HOPED *YOU* WILL HAVE THE COURAGE TO BE AN AGENT OF CHANGE.

NONE OF THE MAJORS HAVE EVER RESPECTED MY GUILD'S SHAPESHIFTING GIFTS.

I CAN SPEAK ONLY FOR THE NOUVEAU.

YOU KNOW THAT.

THEN SPEAK FOR NOUVEAU!

WE LOOK TO YOU AS AN ALLY...

...SOMEONE WHO WILL TREAT US AS PARTNERS RATHER THAN PAWNS!

DID YOU THINK WE'D ALLOW THE HIGH AND MIGHTY TO WALK UPON US FOREVER?

YOUR ANGER IS MISPLACED.

COMPROMISES CAN BE REACHED...

...BUT UNDERSTAND COMPROMISE IS FAR DIFFERENT THAN CAPITULATION.

WHAT MORE MUST WE GIVE? ALREADY WE'VE—

TALK, TALK, TALK...

...ENOUGH TALK.

YOUR TYRANNY HAS GONE ON TOO LONG...

...TODAY IT ENDS IN BLOOD!

CHANK!

YOU CAN'T *SAVE* YOURSELF, NOUVEAU WITCH! NOT FROM THIS *BLADE*...

...NOT FROM ME!

AAAH!

SHRIIPT

YOUR REIGN IS *OVER*, GUILD MASTER!

I WORKED TOWARD THIS MY ENTIRE *LIFE*...

...YOU THINK I'D ALLOW *YOU* TO TAKE IT AWAY SO SOON?

GYAAAH!

MASTER VILLARD!

GENEVIEVE!

ARE YOU HARMED?

NOTHING SERIOUS, JULIAN. JUST A SCRATCH.

BUT WHAT...

...HOW COULD THIS HAVE HAPPENED?

THE TRUE PROTEAN MASTER WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN SO EASILY SUBDUED...

...SO I SUSPECT SOME *OTHER* SHAPESHIFTER TOOK HER PLACE. THE DAGGER MUST HAVE BEEN *CREATED* SPECIFICALLY FOR THIS DEED...

...PROTECTED AGAINST THE CATHEDRAL'S WARDS SO THAT IT COULD BE SUMMONED. AND *THIS*...

...I'M NOT SURE WHAT TO MAKE OF IT. MY SPELL'S PURPOSE WAS TO INCAPACITATE, NOT TO KILL.

THE ATTACKER CHOSE TO *PERISH* RATHER THAN BE TAKEN.

TO KEEP US FROM LEARNING THE TRUTH BEHIND THE ASSASSINATION PLOT.

WHAT OF THE OTHER MASTERS?

WE ARE NOT TO BLAME!

I ASSURE YOU, WE KNEW *NOTHING* OF THIS.

RELEASE THEM.

IT'S OBVIOUS WE'VE *ALL* BEEN THE VICTIMS OF DUPLICITY.

YES, BUT *WHOSE?*

THAT'S WHAT CONCERNS ME MOST, JULIAN. WE HAVE AN ENEMY OUT THERE...

...AND NO IDEA WHO IT IS.

GEN?

I DECIDED IT WAS TOO NICE A NIGHT TO SPEND IT ALONE, AND HERE I FIND YOU DOING THE SAME THING.

Hiya.

SO HOW WAS YOUR DAY?

Oh, THE USUAL, 'ELLE. SURVIVED AN ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT, THAT SORT OF THING.

YOU *WHAT?*

ARE YOU *OKAY?*

FINE. I'M FINE, EVERYTHING'S OKAY...

...BUT I'M TRUTHFULLY TOO EXHAUSTED TO EVEN TALK ABOUT IT RIGHT NOW.

WHAT ABOUT YOUR DAY?

LESS EXCITING THAN ***YOURS.*** I SPENT IT WITH THIERRY, LOOKING IN THE ART GALLERIES DOWN BY THE WATERFRONT.

YOU KNOW, 'ELLE, *I* WAS THE ONE WHO WANTED THE RESPONSIBILITY. I WORKED TO ***GET*** IT. NOW...

...SOMETIMES IT FEELS LIKE SUCH A BIG WEIGHT TO SHOULDER ALL THE TIME.

EVEN WHEN I DIDN'T ***WANT*** YOU TO BE, YOU WERE THERE FOR ME, GEN.

HERE...

...YOU KNOW WHOSE SHOULDER YOU CAN ALWAYS LEAN ON.

MASTER?

I'M SORRY TO DISTURB YOU IN YOUR SANCTUM, BUT THERE'S NEWS.

EARLIER TODAY THERE WAS APPARENTLY AN ATTEMPT ON THE LIFE OF THE NOUVEAU MASTER.

A SHAPESHIFTER GAINED ACCESS TO THE NOUVEAU CATHEDRAL BY MASQUERADING AS MASTER OF THE PROTEAN GUILD, BUT VILLARD WAS UNHARMED.

AND THE ASSASSIN?

DEAD.

SO IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO KNOW IF THE ATTEMPT WAS THE PRODUCT OF ONE DERANGED INDIVIDUAL, OR PART OF A LARGER PLOT.

HOW UNFORTUNATE.

A DISTURBING TURN OF EVENTS, LILLA. IF HARM COULD BEFALL ONE OF MY FELLOW MASTERS IN HER OWN CATHEDRAL...

...THEN WHO AMONG US IS TRULY SAFE?

MOMO?

AGAIN, MOMO.

SURE, BOSS. I'M RIGHT HERE.

HOW *AMUSED* INGRA WOULD BE TO SEE ME REDUCED TO THIS STATE, AND THESE WRETCHED SURROUNDINGS.

AND ALL BECAUSE OF A *WOMAN*.

SOON, THOUGH...

...SOON I'LL BE WHOLE AGAIN.

HELP ME UP.

YOU *SURE*, BOSS? I MEAN, YOU'RE NOT EXACTLY IN GREAT SHAPE.

IT WASN'T A REQUEST.

WE WERE SIMPLY UNPREPARED, ANIMORA AND I. WE DIDN'T UNDERSTAND THE EXTENT OF THE SIGIL'S POWER.

JACKET.

THAT'S A MISTAKE I'LL NOT MAKE AGAIN.

I CERTAINLY CAN'T GO BACK TO ELYSIA AND THE FIRST.

BUT IF THE RUMORS ARE TRUE...

...THEN ANIMORA WAS IMPRISONED ON THE SPIRIT PLANE RATHER THAN DESTROYED.

SO WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO, BOSS?

I'M GOING TO *FREE* HER...

...AND TOGETHER WE'LL REAP OUR VENGEANCE ON THIS MISERABLE PLANET ***AND*** GISELLE VILLARD.

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MYSTIC™

Tony Bedard Brandon Peterson John Dell Andrew Crossley

♫ Mm-♩ hmm-hmmm... da-da-hmm... ♫♫

A *NOSE* WOULD BE USEFUL RIGHT ABOUT NOW...

WELL... IT *LOOKS* GOOD, ANYWAY...

OMELETTE DU FROMAGE!

TEA IS *SERVED*, BOSS. YOU JUST SAY THE WORD, AND I'LL TOSS OUT THE *RIFFRAFF*, TOO.

MOMO... *DO NOT* MAKE ME EXPLAIN THIS TO YOU *AGAIN*...

I TOOK A BIG ***RISK,*** SWITCHING ALLEGIANCE TO ***ANIMORA.*** OR DID YOU THINK MY LADY ***INGRA*** TAKES SUCH BETRAYALS ***LIGHTLY?***

THIS IS WHY WE ARE *'ON THE LAM,'* MY FAITHFUL DIMWIT.

THIS IS WHY I'VE KEPT MY PERSONAL POWER SO WRETCHEDLY ***LOW*** THAT I STILL LOOK LIKE A ROAST PHEASANT...

...OR ELSE SHE'D HOME IN ON ME LIKE A SHIP TO A LIGHTHOUSE.

THIS IS ALSO WHY THE *"RIFFRAFF"* IN THE NEXT ROOM ARE MY NEW BEST FRIENDS.

THAT'S A ***MIST OF OBFUSCATION*** THEY'RE EXHALING. IT'S ALL THAT KEEPS INGRA'S SPIES FROM ***FINDING*** ME.

BESIDES, SINCE I HAVE TO KEEP A LOW PROFILE, WHO ELSE WILL GET THE DOOR?

SOMEONE HERE, BOSS? I DIDN'T HEAR THE BELL.

NOT *THAT* DOOR...

EVERYTHING HAS ITS *PRICE*, MOMO. *TRAVEL*, IN PARTICULAR, CAN TAX ONE'S RESOURCES.

BE A PET AND SNAP THEIR NECKS BEFORE THEY WAKE UP?

MERCI.

I'M LUCKY THESE FINE GENTLEMEN COULD PAY MY WAY, SINCE I'M NOT EXACTLY FLUSH THESE DAYS.

THEIR KINDNESS WILL BE FONDLY REMEMBERED.

I WAS BEGINNING TO WONDER IF YOU'D KEEP THE APPOINTMENT, DARROW.

YOU LOOK *AWFUL*. WORD ON THE HIGHER PLANES IS THAT YOU'RE *DEAD*.

NO SUCH LUCK.

REMEMBER MY *PUPIL*? THE ONE I HAD YOU *SPAR* WITH?

THAT *GIRL* DID THIS TO YOU? I *TOLD* YOU SHE HAD SOMETHING EXTRA!

WHAT *IS* SHE, A *SUCCUBUS*?

NO, GISELLE'S A DREADFULLY *COMMON* GIRL. IT'S THE THING ON HER *PALM* THAT I CAN'T EXPLAIN.

BUT NEVER MIND HER. DID YOU BRING WHAT I *ASKED* YOU FOR?

YOUR WISH IS MY COMMAND.

Heh. SORRY. PEOPLE USUALLY *LOVE IT* WHEN I SAY THAT.

ANYWAY, KEEP THIS UNDER YOUR *TONGUE*. AND NO ONE ELSE WILL KNOW IT'S THERE. EVEN IF THEY'RE *LOOKING* FOR IT.

UNFORTUNATELY, IT'LL TASTE LIKE THE BATHROOM FLOOR ON THE PLANE OF TORMENT..

GET YOUR LAUGHS IN WHILE YOU *CAN*, SHAREEKH. FOR NOW, YOU HAVE MY GRATITUDE... *AND* YOUR FREEDOM.

PRAY YOU NEVER SEE ME AGAIN.

NO OFFENSE, GISELLE, BUT THANKS FOR LEAVING THE SQUIT AT HOME.

NONE TAKEN. I DIDN'T WANT SKITTER DISTRACTING YOU.

SO, YOU ACTUALLY DO ALL THIS STUFF ***BY HAND?*** NO MAGICAL SHORTCUTS?

NOPE. FOR BETTER OR WORSE, THAT'S ALL ***ME.***

I TRY TO KEEP SWITCHING ***MEDIA.*** OIL PAINT, PASTELS, CLAY, MARBLE. THE VARIETY KEEPS THINGS FRESH.

DOESN'T LOOK LIKE THE ***SUBJECT MATTER*** CHANGES MUCH, THOUGH.

Huh?

NOTHING.

THIS IS THE *SPOT*, RIGHT?

RIGHT.

THIERRY, I GOTTA ADMIT... AT FIRST, I WASN'T SURE I COULD *DO* THIS. I MEAN, A GIRL COULD FEEL, Y'KNOW... VULNERABLE, TO SAY THE LEAST.

IT'S JUST A *PORTRAIT*, GISELLE.

DON'T WORRY. IN ABOUT TEN MINUTES YOU'LL GO FROM NERVOUS TO *BORED*.

I KINDA *DOUBT* THAT.

Huh?

...WHOA!

SEVEN SPIRITS, WHAT'D YOU DO *THAT* FOR?!

I *NEVER* SAID I WANTED TO PAINT A *NUDE!*

BUT... ALL YOUR *OTHER* WORK...

...YOUR *SKETCHES*...

...AND SINCE YOU PICKED *THIS* AS A BACKDROP, I ASSUMED...

I JUST... I WOULD *NEVER*...

...NOT THAT IT WOULDN'T BE *BEAUTIFUL*, BUT...

...BUT I REALLY *LIKE* YOU, GISELLE. I DON'T WANT TO RUSH *ANYTHING* WITH YOU.

YOU SURE AREN'T LIKE ANY GUY *I* EVER DATED BEFORE...

"...I MEAN, *MOST* GUYS...

"...THEY GET SO *PUSHY*... THEY GO *TOO FAR*...

"...THEY TAKE ANY *ADVANTAGE*, EVEN *LIE* ABOUT WHO THEY ARE...

"...JUST TO STEAL A *KISS*."

WELL, WELL...OUR GUEST OF HONOR HAS A VISITOR.

DARROW--?!

HAVE YOU GONE **MAD?!**

HOW DO YOU EXPECT TO *FREE* ME WHEN YOU HAVEN'T THE STRENGTH TO *STAND?!*

I...DON'T.

I *SPENT MYSELF* JUST COMING HERE...

...TO SURRENDER.

AND *WHY* WOULD YOU DO SOMETHING LIKE *THAT?*

BECAUSE... I'M *FINISHED.*

GISELLE ONLY LEECHED ENOUGH OF *ANIMORA'S* POWER TO MAKE HER YOUR *CAPTIVE.*

FOR ME IT WAS *DIFFERENT.* GISELLE BLED ME *DRY.* SHE BURNED ME OUT.

PERMANENTLY.

ALL I HAVE LEFT TO SUSTAIN ME...

...IS MY *LOVE* FOR ANIMORA.

BACK ON CIRESS, I'LL BE NOTHING BUT A CRIPPLE FOR THE REST OF MY ENDLESS LIFE.

I'M *BEGGING* YOU: LET ME SPEND ETERNITY *HERE*... IN BONDAGE...WITH THE QUEEN OF MY *HEART.*

WE SAW HOW YOU DUPED OUR GISELLE.

YOU'LL FIND NO FAVOR HERE. GO HOME AND REAP WHAT YOU'VE SOWN.

WAIT. SHE OBVIOUSLY *LOATHES* THIS WORM. WHY WASTE A GOOD OPPORTUNITY?

NO!

DARLING, PLEASE...

IF I HAD *ANY* STRENGTH LEFT, I'D **OBLITERATE** YOU!

THEN *KISS* ME, INSTEAD... AND TAKE *STRENGTH* FROM MY LOVE...

GET HIM *OFF* ME! GET HIM—

GRAHH! YOU'VE *THROWN AWAY* MY LAST SHRED OF HOPE!

—OFF?

...TAKE *STRENGTH*...

DARROW, YOU SNEAKY *DEVIL!*

YOU REALLY KNOW HOW TO LIGHT A GIRL'S *FIRE!*

=ungh=

EEYAHGHH!

SWEET MUSIC TO MY EARS...

ALL TOGETHER NOW...

STOP HER!

FACE ME!

WAIT YOUR TURN.

AIIEE!

DON'T *SQUANDER*... THE POWER I SMUGGLED YOU...!

IT'S *NOT* ENOUGH...TO BEAT THEM ALL...

...BUT IT *WILL* PUT US...BACK ON *CIRESS*...OUT OF THEIR REACH!

VERY WELL...

RROOOAARRR!

YIPE!

RR--?

I SUPPOSE I'LL KNOW WHERE TO FIND THEM ONCE I'VE PUT *THIS* PLANE TO THE TORCH.

IT JUST FEELS GOOD TO BE THE ONE *INFLICTING* PAIN AGAIN!

IN FACT, I FEEL BETTER THAN I HAVE IN *EONS*.

YOUR... HAIR ..?

YOUR *FACE!*

ANIMORA, YOU'RE...*YOU* AGAIN!

BY THE RIFT! HOW CAN THIS *BE?*

PERHAPS...

...PERHAPS WHEN GISELLE SIPHONED YOUR ENERGY...SHE TOOK WITH IT THE *CURSE*...

YES, SHE MUST HAVE REMOVED THE "*CAPSTONE*" ***INGRA*** PLACED UPON MY POWER THE DAY SHE CAST ME OUT OF PARADISE...

DARROW, IT'S A COSMIC JOKE! BY ***DEFEATING*** ME, YOUR PET MYSTIC UNLEASHED MY ***TRUE*** STRENGTH!

I CAN ***FEEL*** HER OUT THERE, YOU KNOW. THE CONNECTION'S A BIT... ***VAGUE***...BUT GISELLE STILL CARRIES MUCH OF WHAT SHE STOLE FROM ME.

AND...oh... oh, YESSS...

I JUST HAD A WONDERFULLY ***WICKED*** IDEA!

SSSSSSSHHKKKRRRRRRRRKRIKRMMBLESH

SHALL WE STEP *INSIDE* AND DISCUSS IT?

>UNGH<... IF IT'S NOT... TOO MUCH TROUBLE... MIGHT YOU SPARE A *BOON*...

...FOR THE ONE WHO... BROUGHT YOU FREEDOM...?

YOU ASK *GRATITUDE*--

--FROM *ANIMORA?*

er...

=GASP=

ALTWAAL'S EYES, YOU SCARED THE WITS OUT OF ME!

ON A GOOD DAY, I EVEN SCARE *MYSELF.*

...BUT THE *REALLY* SCARY PART WASN'T TAKING ON ANIMORA. I MEAN, I DIDN'T HAVE MUCH *CHOICE* THERE, DID I?

WHAT *REALLY* FRIGHTENS ME IS HOW EASILY DARROW *PLAYED* ME.

I, uh...WASN'T GONNA BRING IT UP MYSELF, BUT...I AM *SO* SORRY...

...THAT LYING SACK OF SPELLS PRETTY MUCH *USED* YOU.

YEAH, I GUESS HE *DID*. BUT THE WEIRD THING IS...I FEEL EVEN *WORSE* ABOUT HOW I USED *HIM*.

I JUST ABOUT SUCKED THE *LIFE* OUT OF HIM...*AND* ANIMORA.

BAD ENOUGH THEY PLAYED ME FOR A FOOL.

I WILL *NOT* BE MADE INTO A KILLER.

Y'KNOW, GISELLE...IT DOESN'T TAKE A ROCKET-SORCERER TO SEE THAT YOU'RE *PRETTY*...

...BUT I'M ONLY JUST BEGINNING TO SEE THAT YOU'RE ***BEAUTIFUL.***

C'MERE.

Make it count, girl, cuz it all goes ***DOWNHILL*** from here...

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BLESSED BE, GREAT ORACLE. MY APOLOGIES FOR DISTURBING YOU LIKE THIS, BUT YOUR GUIDANCE IS SORELY NEEDED.
THE MASTER OF ENCHANTRESS GUILD, APOLOGIZE TO ME?
NO, THAT WON'T DO, FOR ANSWERS TRUE ARE WHAT I'VE PLEDGED TO THEE.
ON YOUR BEHALF I'LL GLADLY PART THE VEIL THAT HIDES TOMORROW...
BEWARE, YINMA, FOR ALL I SEE IS DEATH AND LOSS AND SORROW!
THE ANCIENT FOE WE THOUGHT BROUGHT LOW! I FEEL HER EVIL SENTIENCE!
HER REBORN POWER SPEEDS THE HOUR OF LONG DESIRED VENGEANCE!
SKRIK

=ACK=

ORACLE!

MASTER! WHAT *IS* THIS?

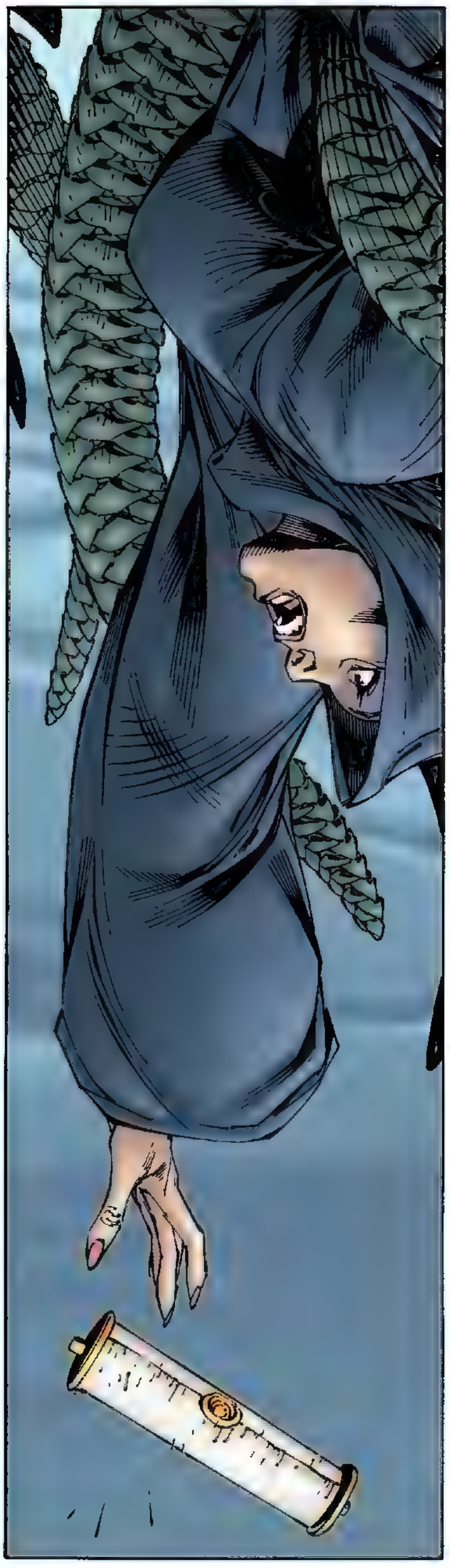
THE ***LAST*** THING YOU WILL EVER SEE IF YOU DON'T MOVE FAST!

WE ARE GOING TO NEED ***HELP!*** BUT MY DUTY IS TO STAND AND ***FIGHT...***

YOU TAKE THIS TO THE ***NOUVEAU*** MASTER. IT HAS AN ***ENTRY GLYPH*** THAT WILL GUIDE YOU STRAIGHT TO HER.

HURRY! OR THERE MIGHT BE NOTHING LEFT TO SAVE!

THUD



THUD

...SURVIVORS FROM THE ENCHANTRESS CATHEDRAL SAID THE TENTACLES SHED SPECIAL *SCALES*--

--AND THAT THOSE SCALES SPROUTED UP INTO SEPARATE *CREATURES* THE MOMENT THEY FELL TO THE GROUND.

LIKE PLANTING *DRAGON'S TEETH.*

EXACTLY. I HAVE TWO DIVISIONS OF SCRY-CORPS WORKING ON A *COUNTER-SPELL.* NO JOY SO FAR...

MEANWHILE, SIMILAR INCURSIONS HAVE BEEN REPORTED IN *OTHER* GUILD LANDS, MOVING *UP* STEADILY FROM THE SOUTHERN LATITUDES.

THE SCALE-BEASTS HAVE MARCHED RIGHT THROUGH *EVERYTHING* THROWN AT THEM--THE DJINN ROC BOMBER WING, THE SHAMAN SPIRIT-DRUMMERS, THE TANTRIC CHI-CASTERS--

ARE YOU SUGGESTING WE CAN'T WIN, GENERAL LAURANCE?

YOU CAN SEE CLEARLY ENOUGH *WHO* WE'RE UP AGAINST, AND WE'VE BEATEN HER BEFORE...

IF YOU'RE IMPLYING THIS IS *ANIMORA'S* WORK, THEN I MUST HAVE *MISSED* A BRIEFING.

...BECAUSE *YOU* AND THE OTHER GUILD MASTERS ASSURED US SHE'S IN *CUSTODY* ON THE SPIRIT PLANE. *CORRECT?*

YES...WELL, APPARENTLY *NOT.*

NOW, WHAT ABOUT MY *SISTER?* HAVE YOUR MEN BROUGHT HER IN AS REQUESTED?

DON'T WORRY, THEY HAVE HER APARTMENT BUILDING SECURED. BUT YOU DON'T NEED HER *DISTRACTING* YOU RIGHT NOW.

DO NOT SECOND-GUESS ME! SOMEBODY BRING ME A *PHONE!*

MASTER VILLARD! STAY BEHIND—

STAND DOWN, JACQUES. SEE THAT GLYPH? IT'S THE HOTLINE SCROLL I GAVE TO MASTER YINMA.

GENEVIEVE VILLARD, MASTER OF THE NOUVEAU GUILD! THE DEMON QUEEN HAS ***RETURNED!***

YOUR SISTER ***MUST*** *KNOW HOW ANIMORA ESCAPED! ENLIST HER* ***AID!***

NOT ***AGAIN*** WITH YOUR SISTER! WITH ALL DUE RESPECT, HOW COULD A ***DEBUTANTE*** BE OF ***ANY*** USE TO US AT A TIME LIKE THIS?

LONG STORY. THE IMPORTANT THING RIGHT NOW IS THAT IT'S ONE-THIRTY IN THE ***AFTERNOON...***

...SO THERE'S ONLY ***ONE PLACE*** GISELLE COULD BE...

RING RING

Hey!

...huh...?

It's about TIME, sleeping beauty! I was beginning to think I'd have to take MYSELF for a walk...

...only YOU tell me how I'm supposed to hold my own LEASH...!

YEAH, OKAY. LEMME GET DRESSED.

Mm...STILL CAN'T BELIEVE, AFTER EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENED BETWEEN US LAST NIGHT, HE DIDN'T ASK ME TO STAY OVER.

YOU DON'T THINK THERE'S SOMETHING ***WRONG*** WITH HIM, DO YOU?

Who, THIERRY? Not unless being a GENTLEMAN counts as "something wrong" nowadays.

RING RING

RING RING

Or haven't you ever MET a gentleman?

Y'know, they even do things like CALL the next day...

GISELLE!

WH...?

COME TO US! NOW!

SAYING "PLEASE" NOW AND THEN WOULD BE--

WE SHOULD HAVE COMMUNED WITH YOU THE INSTANT HE ARRIVED.

HE WHO?! ARRIVED WHERE?

HERE. THE SPIRIT PLANE. IT WAS DARROW.

Um...DIDN'T I SORT OF SHRIVEL DARROW...?

SOMEHOW, HE RECOVERED AFTER YOU DRAINED HIS ENERGIES. THEN HE STOLE IN HERE WITHOUT YOUR KNOWING.

BUT, HOW? DON'T YOU GUYS LIVE INSIDE MY HEAD?

DON'T BE SUCH A DOLT! THE SPIRIT PLANE IS EVERYWHERE AND NO PLACE! AND THERE ARE MANY WAYS IN!

Uh-oh. I THINK I JUST FIGURED OUT THE PUNCHLINE...

...WHERE'S *ANIMORA?*

DARROW **VEILED** *HIS TREACHERY ALL TOO WELL.*

WITH A **KISS,** *HE SLIPPED HER SOME KIND OF* **ENERGY PILL.**

AFTER THAT, SHE WAS TOO MUCH FOR US TO CONTAIN.

SHE RIPPED THROUGH US LIKE A **LIONESS!** *WE SIGNALED YOU AS SOON AS WE RECOVERED, BUT...*

...SURELY *ALL OF CIRESS KNOWS BY NOW THAT THE BEAST HAS RETURNED?!*

I'M, uh, NOT SURE... BUT I'LL FIND OUT! JUST KEEP ***TALKING*** TO ME...

...I'M GONNA NEED ALL THE **HELP** I CAN GET!

You ain't kiddin', sister.

I KNEW we shouldn't've missed "Nouveau Newsbreak." This looks like it's been goin' on ALL DAY!

...IN JUST TWENTY-FOUR HOURS, THE MONSTERS HAVE CLAIMED THE ENCHANTRESS, SHAMAN AND TANTRIC LANDS.

WE FINALLY HAVE FOOTAGE IN FROM THE **SHAMAN LANDS** OF SOME OF THE **CREATURES** ACTUALLY BEING **CREATED**...

...EACH TIME, IT BEGAN WITH TENTACLES **SPROUTING** FROM BENEATH THE LOCAL GUILD CATHEDRAL, THEN **SHEDDING** GIANT SCALES EVERYWHERE...

...WHICH GREW INTO A FANTASTIC VARIETY OF GIANT BEASTS THAT MARCHED OUT ACROSS THE COUNTRYSIDE.

SINCE THEN, THE CREATURES HAVE UNITED AND OVERRUN THE ASTRAL AND DARK MAGI ARMIES.

THEY ARE EXPECTED TO REACH THE NOUVEAU FRONTIER THIS EVENING.

BUT THE **BIG QUESTION** REMAINS...

"...WHERE ARE THE *GUILD MASTERS* OF THE FALLEN LANDS?"

VERY IMPRESSIVE RESULTS, ANIMORA, BUT WHY THE *RUSH?* SOMEHOW, I EXPECTED YOU TO *SAVOR* THE CONQUEST...

WHY *BOTHER?* THIS WORLD MAY BE A *RICH* LITTLE MORSEL, BUT IT'S STILL JUST THE *APPETIZER.*

HOME IS THE MAIN COURSE, DARROW. BEAUTIFUL ELYSIA.

MARK MY WORDS: INGRA'S VAUNTED RAGE WILL TURN TO TERROR WHEN I SNATCH OUR BIRTH-WORLD FROM HER GRASP.

TERROR, eh? NO OFFENSE, ANIMORA, BUT YOU LOOKED MUCH MORE FRIGHTENING BEFORE...

DON'T BE COY: YOU PREFERRED ME ALL FANGS AND SCALES.

GET OVER IT. THE "GORGON LOOK" WAS NEVER REALLY ME AT ALL.

WITH INGRA'S CURSE OUT OF MY SYSTEM, I'M AFRAID YOU'LL JUST HAVE TO SETTLE FOR MY ORIGINAL FACE, AND KISS MY ORIGINAL...

...FEET.

NOW, IF YOU DON'T MIND, I'D LIKE TO CONCENTRATE ON MY FUN. AT LEAST UNTIL A CERTAIN SOMEONE FINALLY TAKES UP MY INVITATION TO COME OUT AND PLAY...

ARGUS ONE TO NOUVEAU LINE COMMAND! APPROACHING ENEMY FRONT! DO YOU COPY?

ROGER THAT, ARGUS...

...TROOPS ARE STANDING BY. HOW MANY UNITS SHOULD WE ACTIVATE, OVER?

ALL OF THEM!

REPEAT, COMMIT ALL FORCES!

...AND THEN SEE IF YOU CAN CONJURE UP MORE...!

UNDERSTOOD, ARGUS. RETURN TO BASE.

THE ARMY CORPS OF WARLOCKS IS RAISING OUR FRONTLINE **GOLEMS** RIGHT NOW...

...AIR SUPPORT'S ON ITS WAY, TOO...

LACEWING BOMBARDIERS REPORTING IN! READY TO COMMENCE ATTACK RUN!

LACEWINGS ARE **GO!**

WE'RE HARDLY SLOWING THEM DOWN.

GENERAL CLEMENT, INFORM THE ACOLYTES: IT'S TIME TO ACTIVATE THE *COLOSSI*.

AYE, MASTER VILLARD.

GISELLE, WHERE *ARE* YOU...?

BRACE YOURSELVES, GENTLEMEN...

ROAR

KREEEE

NOW, OPEN A LINE TO THE OTHERS!

AYE, MASTER VILLARD! GO AHEAD...

ARMIES OF THE NOUVEAU LANDS!

STAND FAST AND FIGHT!

FIGHT! FOR YOUR WAY OF LIFE! FOR YOUR HOMES AND FAMILIES!

HOLD THE LINE!

DAMMIT...

...WHERE *IS* SHE...?

YOU! MASTERS OF *NOTHING!*

I HAVE A ***MESSAGE*** FOR YOU WORMS TO DELIVER!

ONWARD!

HURRY, GISELLE...

MASTER! SOMEONE'S TELEPORTING IN!

MMMMM

FLASH

FINALLY! IT'S OKAY! IT'S ONLY MY SIS--

--TER...?

WHAT DOES IT *TAKE*... TO GET HER *ATTENTION?* WHY DOES SHE NOT... SHOW HER *FACE?!*

...''HER''...? *WHO* DO YOU...

Oh, NO..

Don't give up now, sweet thing. The party's just startin'!

SKITTER?!

BUT IF *YOU'RE* HERE, THEN...

That's RIGHT...

WAM!

"...she's fashionably LATE again!"

Giselle

Fan artist David Morán has an interesting hobby. He takes photographs of models from a variety of sources and enhances them through Adobe® Photoshop® to produce unique fan pieces depicting his favorite characters. After buying the MYSTIC trade paperback, he decided to try his luck with Giselle, CrossGen's favorite sorceress. This piece first caught our eye when WizardWorld.com posted it online. If you enjoyed David's version of Giselle, feel free to check out more of his artwork at www.geocities.com/davidjosemoran.

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MYSTIC

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THE *DEMON QUEEN* BUSTS OUT OF LIMBO...

...*GIANT LIZARDS* RUN AMUCK...

...*HEADS OF STATE* TURN INTO *MONSTERS*...

...AND ALL BECAUSE I *OVERSLEPT?!*

GISELLE! THIS IS *SERIOUS!*

OKAY, GEN-- I'M SORRY I WAS *LATE!* I CAME THE *MINUTE* I FOUND OUT *ANIMORA* HAD ESCAPED!

WHERE *IS* SHE, BY THE WAY?

I DON'T KNOW!

DON'T YOU THINK WE'VE GOT OUR HANDS FULL AS IT IS?

RIGHT. I'LL HANDLE THE *LITTLE* MONSTERS...YOU TAKE CARE OF THE *BIG* ONES...

JUST DON'T *KILL* THEM! THEY'RE STILL *GUILD MASTERS* UNDER THOSE SCALES!

SEVEN SPIRITS, I HOPE SHE REALIZES WHAT'S AT STAKE HERE...

GENERAL CLEMENT, HAVE THE COLOSSI CLOSE RANKS--IT'S *ALL OR NOTHING* NOW!

AYE, MASTER VILLARD.

I'LL HELP THE TROOPS ON THE GROUND!

YOU KNOW, MARCEAU, IF SHE WASN'T COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF...

YEAH, ME TOO...

GISELLE! LET ME KNOW IF YOU NEED *HELP!*

I'M =UNGH<...

I'M *FINE,* GEN!

FAR FROM IT, GIRL! YOU'LL HAVE TO STRIKE *MUCH* HARDER IF YOU EXPECT TO *DESTROY* US!

IN CASE YOU HAVEN'T *NOTICED...*

=ANHH<

...I DON'T *WANT* TO DESTROY *ANYONE!*

NOT EVEN A RAT LIKE *YOU,* MAGUS...

"...*MURDER* IS FOR *LOSERS*, LIKE THE ONE WHO'S PULLING YOUR *STRINGS* RIGHT NOW..."

GISELLE'S HOLDING HER OWN RATHER IMPRESSIVELY.

SHE *SHOULD* BE. THAT'S MOSTLY *MY* ENERGY SHE'S THROWING AROUND, REMEMBER?

I CAN STILL *SEE* IT, DARROW: THE *RAGE* AND THE *THRILL* IN HER EYES AS SHE DRAINED THE *LIFE* OUT OF ME.

I'LL *RIP* THE LITTLE *MONKEY* APART FOR THAT ONE DAY...

AFTER WE PLAY THIS OUT.

OF COURSE, MY PET.

SO DO YOU THINK SHE'S WORKED UP AN *APPETITE* YET?

YES, ANIMORA. ENJOY GETTING YOUR HANDS DIRTY. AND DON'T WORRY...

SSSLINK

SHHHWIP

SHLUP

...THERE'S *NO WAY* I'LL LET DOWN *MY* END. THE *PAYOFF'S* JUST TOO GOOD TO MISS.

HEY, *SPIRITS!* ARE YOU GUYS *PAYING ATTENTION?*

BECAUSE THESE *GUILD MONSTERS* AREN'T CUTTING *ME* ANY BREAKS!

YES, GISELLE, WE ARE WATCHING FROM THE SPIRIT PLANE...

*...AND WE ARE EVEN LESS SANGUINE THAN YOU AT THE PROSPECT OF SLAYING OUR **INHERITORS**, NO MATTER HOW TWISTED THEY'VE BECOME.*

*THEY MAY LEAVE US WITH NO OTHER **OPTION**, LeCAVALIER.*

GYAHH!

SSSLIISHH

SLAASHH

...WAIT ...NGH... DON'T...

GISELLE!

BAM

THROUGH

THEY'VE SWITCHED FROM **SPELL-CASTING** TO MORE DIRECT **PHYSICAL** ATTACKS!

GISELLE, YOU CAN'T DEFLECT THESE LIKE THE OTHER—

COLOSSUS FIVE TO NOUVEAU LINE COMMAND! WE'VE TAKEN A HIT!

—CALM DOWN, LeCAVALIER. IF THEY'RE GETTING **PHYSICAL** WITH HER, THEN THEY'VE STRAYED INTO **MY** TERRITORY.

AND WHAT WOULD THE **TANTRIC GUILD** SUGGEST?

KISSING THE ENEMY? OR PERHAPS A NICE **GROUP HUG?**

THE SPELL I HAVE IN MIND WOULD REQUIRE GISELLE TO **SHUNT** MUCH OF HER POWER INTO **A TOUGHER** BODY...

...PERHAPS ONE OF THE **EARTH-GOLEMS** THE NOUVEAU ARMY CONJURED TO FIGHT THE GIANT BEASTS?

I THINK I HAVE SOMETHING EVEN ***BETTER***. JUST GIVE ME THE SPELL.

COLOSSUS FIVE TO NOUVEAU LINE COMMAND! MOTION-CONTROL GLYPHS ARE OFF-LINE!

RE-EE-EE-NK

Oh, YEAH...

THIS IS COLOSSUS FIVE AGAIN. *NEVER MIND.*

WHOOSH

Eh?

=HAKK=

=UNGH= YOU BOYS WANNA STEP *INSIDE?*

NO!

SHLUK

SHHHH

FRANCOIS, DID YOU HAVE ANY *IDEA*--

--THAT THE GUILD MASTER'S *SISTER* COULD *DO* THIS KIND OF THING? *NONE.*

GUESS I WAS TOO BUSY STARING AT HER *LEGS,* LIKE EVERYONE ELSE.

GENTLEMEN... =NFF=...IF YOU DON'T *MIND*...

SHE CAN *HEAR* US...?!

ANIMORA! HELP US!

SHHHLUK

GENERAL LAURANCE!

MASTER VILLARD.

GENEVIEVE...

I SERVED YOUR ***FATHER***. I'VE ***KNOWN*** YOU AND GISELLE SINCE YOU WERE LITTLE GIRLS. ***YOU*** TURNED OUT TO BE EVERYTHING I EXPECTED... BUT ***TELL*** ME...

...WHAT IN THE WORLD HAS YOUR ***SISTER*** TURNED INTO...?

OUR LAST HOPE.

SHHHHHLUNK

ANIMORA, WE *BEG* YOU!

GISELLE! **WATCH OUT!**

S'OKAY... I'M JUST ***WORN OUT***...

BUT... I TRAPPED THE ***LAST*** OF THEM. ***THANKS,*** TANTRIC-GUY...

THE NAME IS ***HEROTUS.*** AND IT WAS MY PLEASURE.

=MMF!=

=GROAN=... JUST GLAD I SKIPPED BREAKFAST...

EVERYONE, LOOK!

THE CREATURES ARE RETREATING!

LACEWING SQUADRON! CAN YOU CONFIRM?

LACEWING TWO HERE. THEY'RE NOT EXACTLY **RETREATING,** GENERAL...

...LOOKS LIKE THEY'RE **CONVERGING** JUST A FEW HUNDRED METERS IN FRONT OF YOUR POSITION, AND...

...SEVEN SPIRITS...

KRUNCH

MUCHA

KLUNT

GLUP

SHLUP

SHWUP

MASTER VILLARD...

I *SEE* IT, JACQUES.

Oh, THAT IS JUST *GROSS*...

NICE TRICK WITH THAT ***STATUE,*** GISELLE. VERY IMPRESSIVE.

IT'S GOOD TO THINK ***BIG*** AT A TIME LIKE THIS.

BUT YOU LOOK *TIRED*, MY DEAR.

YOU SHOULD'VE JUST *ANNIHILATED* THE MASTERS THE MOMENT I SET THEM UPON YOU. INSTEAD YOU *WASTED* ALL THAT TIME AND EFFORT TO *TRAP* THEM.

I SUPPOSE YOU SHOULD BE CONGRATULATED FOR SAVING *THEIR* LIVES...

...BUT HOW MANY NOUVEAU *SOLDIERS DIED* WHILE YOU WERE BUSY SPARING THE *ENEMY?*

AND NOW YOU HAVE *NOTHING LEFT* TO KEEP ME FROM DOING--

--*THIS!*

SHRAKA KRODORA

NHAA!

THAT'S THE SPIRIT!

YOU KNOW, YOU HAVEN'T SAID A *WORD* ABOUT MY *HAIR*...

SO YOU CHANGED YOUR *LOOKS*.

SO WHAT?

INSIDE, YOU'RE STILL... THE SAME OLD *ROTTEN* --

YOU HAVE *NO* IDEA!

WHULP

I'M *STRONGER* NOW, YOU SEE?

THIS IS THE *REAL* ME, NOT THE CURSED, WEAKENED *THING* YOU SUCKED THE LIFE OUT OF BEFORE.

AND HOW YOU *LOVED* IT-- FEELING ME WITHER IN YOUR HANDS! WATCHING THE LIGHT FADE FROM MY EYES!

NO! =NNF=... IT FELT *SICK!*

YES, YES...YOUR PRECIOUS *MORALITY.* IT MAKES YOU *BETTER* THAN ME, DOESN'T IT?

THAT KIND OF THINKING -- THAT *"RIGHT"* VERSUS *"WRONG"* *GIBBERISH*-- SPLIT MY PEOPLE IN TWO...

=ANH=

SHRIPPP

GET BEHIND ME.

...AND IF THERE'S *ONE THING* I'LL MAKE YOU SEE BEFORE YOU DIE --

--IT'S THAT MORALS MEAN *NOTHING* AGAINST *TRUE POWER!*

SPLUT

LAURANCE!

GEN!

SHHRNNKLE

OKAY, ANIMORA--

--YOU WIN.

=GASP=

ALL OF THIS...JUST TO GET HERSELF KILLED?

NO... THERE IS ANOTHER CASUALTY HERE...

GISELLE! GET AWAY FROM HER!

...YOU WIN...

...YOU WIN...

...YOU WIN...

Change is Good

Well, I hope you all enjoyed this issue of MYSTIC, as it is the last issue I am drawing of the regular series, and I wanted it to be as good as possible. I'm moving on to a new position as Vice President of Production Control at CrossGen, and while I will keep drawing, my new job means I can't do it and draw a monthly title at the same time. I have been very gratified at the response MYSTIC has gotten over the past two years by readers, and the vast majority of feedback I've gotten has been very positive.

One thing that has been bothering me as of late, though, is that some people have expressed concern over how the book will fare after I leave. While this apprehension is very flattering, I think readers will be blown away by the new penciler, Fabrizio Fiorentino. Fabrizio is an amazing newcomer who started out in CrossGen's Associate Artist training program and his skills have grown exponentially. He's already done one issue of MYSTIC, #17, and he only gets better from there. Fabrizio is passionate about MYSTIC and brings the enthusiasm and attention to detail that this book needs. I look forward to seeing his art each month in the pages of MYSTIC from here on out. Together with the modestly masterful inker Matt Ryan and the unbelievable colors of original series colorist Andrew Crossley, the art on this book is sure to be spectacular. I know that new series writer Tony Bedard has already impressed many of you the last few months, and I'll be eagerly waiting to see what he'll do with this artistic crew.

I know that MYSTIC has gone through a lot of changes the last few months with writer Ron Marz, inker John Dell, and myself moving on to different projects within CrossGen, but I would ask you all to welcome these changes. CrossGen has from the start been about change, from changing the way creators work together to changing the way a publisher treats its fans. We've bucked the superhero trend and explored themes of science fiction and fantasy when others were afraid to. We've changed from a publisher putting out four books a month to over a dozen, and that growth has allowed new titles like SOJOURN and RUSE to thrive in a market that might not have given them a chance a few years ago. The changes we've forged have all been done with the spirit that we here at CrossGen believe: that we will do only our best, all of the time, on time.

Trust that MYSTIC is in good hands, and come see what those hands are capable of creating next month and every month afterward.

Brandon

Brandon Peterson

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Tony Bedard Fabrizio Fiorentino Matt Ryan Andrew Crossley

ARE YOU *HAPPY* NOW?

ARE YOU?!

GISELLE!

...

...GEN...?

Oh, GEN... SHE GOT WHAT SHE WANTED, *DIDN'T* SHE?

SHE MADE A *KILLER* OUT OF ME.

NO.

IT'S NOT MURDER IF A SOLDIER DEFENDS HER COUNTRY.

ANIMORA THREATENED THE *WORLD*.

YOU CAME THROUGH, 'ELLE. YOU *SAVED* US ALL.

FWOOSH

?

Um...

YOU'RE THE MAGIC EXPERT, GEN. ARE THEY *SUPPOSED* TO GO UP IN SMOKE ONCE THEY'RE DEAD?

I *GUESS* SO. I DON'T KNOW. I'VE NEVER MET ANYTHING *LIKE* ANIMORA BEFORE.

HOPE I *NEVER* DO AGAIN.

BUT *THIS* THING...! I THOUGHT IT WAS A *CURSE*.

I'M STARTING TO SEE THAT IT'S A *GIFT*.

IF IT KILLED THE DEMON QUEEN, JUST THINK OF THE *GOOD* WE COULD DO WITH SUCH POWER.

MAYBE *THIS* IS WHAT FATE ALWAYS INTENDED FOR ME: TO *HELP* YOU MASTER THE SIGIL...

FOR YOU AND I TO *SHARE* THE RESPONSI--

I DON'T THINK SO, GENEVIEVE. SORRY.

YOU CAN ALREADY DO *PLENTY* OF GOOD AS *GUILD MASTER*.

WHATEVER *I'M* MEANT TO DO WITH MY LIFE, THAT'S FOR *ME* TO FIGURE OUT MYSELF.

JUST... JUST LEAVE ME *ALONE* FOR A WHILE...

ARE YOU ALL RIGHT? I DIDN'T *SINGE* YOU, DID I?

NO, DARROW. YOUR TIMING WAS IMPECCABLE. DO YOU THINK THEY *BOUGHT* IT?

YES. THE TELEPORT EFFECT BLENDED WITH THE COLOR OF THE FLAME SPELL. I EVEN LEFT A SCORCH-MARK ON THE GROUND SHAPED LIKE YOU--

PLEASE. EVEN WHEN I'M FEELING GOOD, I CAN'T STOMACH YOUR BOASTING...

WHAT ABOUT GISELLE? SHOULDN'T WE FOLLOW HER?

NO NEED. SHE'S RIGHT *HERE*, WHENEVER I NEED HER.

FOR NOW, LET HER GO *HOME*...

"...HOME TO HER QUAINT LITTLE CITY, WHERE THE NEIGHBORS ARE FRIENDLY...

CIRESSONE'S

"...AND THE STREETS ARE SAFE."

Meep! Meep!

Meep!

WE'RE *LOSING* 'EM!

S'OKAY...

"...***SARGE*** BLOCKED OFF THE BACK OF THE ALLEY."

SETTLE DOWN, KIDS. I'M NOT MUCH FOR ***EXERCISE***. SO WHAT SAY WE CUT OUT THE ***RUNNIN'*** AND JUST HAND OVER THE ***BAG,*** NICE AND SLOW?

BUTCH...?

SOFT?

POOF

WING IT, SMALL FRY! THAT SOUNDED SHORT-RANGE -- THEY'LL 'PORT BACK IN NEARBY...

Meep! Meep! Meep!

POOF

YOU *HEARD* THE LITTLE GUY! *MOVE IT!*

WE SHOULD SPLIT UP. I'LL--

AH!

KLINK

KLATCH

NO!

Meep!

YEAH, I SEE 'EM.

NPD

D'JA HEAR *THAT*, TIMMONS? THEY THINK WE'RE HAULIN' 'EM *IN*.

CAN'T BE *TOO* BRIGHT, CONSIDERIN' WHO THEY'RE STEALIN' *FROM*.

SPEAKIN' OF WHICH, MAYBE YOU TWO CAN EXPLAIN IT TO THE *DETECTIVE*...

OKAY, SO WE *LET* THEM ARREST US. BIG DEAL. ONCE THIS COMES TO *TRIAL*—

YVES MANION, NOUVEAU P.D. BUNCO SQUAD.

I BELIEVE YOU HAVE SOMETHING THAT DOESN'T *BELONG* TO YOU.

HERE YA GO, SIR.

Hey!

GOOD EVENING, MISTER TINKLEBRIAR. ARE YOU GENTLEMEN OKAY?

It wuz a rough ride, but we'll be fine.

GOOD, GOOD. BECAUSE IF MY BEST EARNERS HAD BEEN HURT OR GONE MISSING...WELL, LET'S JUST SAY THERE'D BE *HELL* TO PAY.

...THE *PIXIE DUST LAB*...

...THEY CHURN OUT THAT POISON FOR *YOU*...?!

BUT...ALL OF THESE COPS CAN'T BE IN YOUR POCKET...

IT'S PRETTY DAMN OBVIOUS THEY *CAN,* NELLY!
FACE IT: YOUR BLEEDING-HEART FRIENDS SENT US TO *LIBERATE* THE WRONG FRIGGIN' *PIXIES!*
NO. THEY'LL COME *LOOKING* FOR US! DO YOU *HEAR* ME, DETECTIVE? THIS WON'T END WITH THE TWO OF US!
YOU'RE UP AGAINST THE *P.E.T.F.* NOW!
"PEOPLE FOR THE ETHICAL TREATMENT OF FAIRY-FOLK"? THAT'S IT, BOYS-- MY GOOSE IS *COOKED!*
HEAVEN HELP ME, I SWORE I'D *NEVER* DO THIS, BUT...
WHAT DID YOU JUST *SUMMON...?*

FAASH

BUTCH... WHAT HAVE YOU DONE...?

DEMON OF THE BRIMSTONE PLANE...

...YOU ARE HERE AT MY BIDDING!

PROTECT ME FROM MY ENEMIES!

YEAH, YEAH, I KNOW THE DRILL...

SAY... AREN'T YOU ONE OF DUKE ABADDON'S BOYS?

Um... YEAH...?

I'M DETECTIVE MANION.

YOU *TELL* YOUR BOSS NEXT TIME YOU SEE HIM: THE *THING* I DID FOR HIM WHEN HIS *NEPHEW* WENT MISSING LAST YEAR...?

TELL HIM YOU *SETTLED* THAT DEBT TONIGHT. YOU *GET* ME?

LOUD AND CLEAR.

HE'S A FRIEND OF THE *DUKE*. YOU KNOW HOW IT IS...

AAAIIIEEEEEE

"SORRY, PAL, BUT YOU'RE OUT OF LUCK--"

...MISS VILLARD LEFT EARLIER. DECKED OUT LIKE SHE'S BACK ON THE OLD NIGHT-OWL CIRCUIT, TOO.

ARE YOU *SURE?* WE, um...WE HAVE A *DATE*...

I'LL BUZZ HER PLACE, JUST TO BE SURE, BUT—

BZZZZ

HELLO?

MISS VILLARD...?

Nah. This is her *COUSIN*. Send the kid up. We're *EXPECTIN'* him.

FUNNY, BUT I DIDN'T EVEN *ANNOUNCE* YOU WERE DOWN HERE.

YEAH. GUESS I *WAS* EXPECTED...

Hiya, Thierry! Boy, am I glad to see you!

WHAT'S WRONG? IS GISELLE IN TROUBLE?

Ya might say that. Ever since that last tussle with Animora, our girl's been actin' kinda ***WEIRD***.

SO IT ***WASN'T*** JUST MY IMAGINATION.

She sleeps all day. Doesn't clean up. And her grudge against all things magical is worse than ever.

I THOUGHT THAT WAS ***NORMAL*** FOR HER.

Maybe so, but it's not what I need -- what ***ALL*** of us need -- from her.

Like it or not, she's got a ***JOB*** to do, and it's not the kind you can call in sick for.

SO WHAT AM ***I*** SUPPOSED TO DO ABOUT IT?

She ***LIKES*** you, kid. She won't listen to ***ME***. Maybe she'll listen to ***YOU***.

DO YOU EVEN KNOW WHERE TO ***FIND*** HER?

I've got a pretty good idea where to start sniffin' around...

Y'KNOW, FOR SOMEONE WHO ALWAYS SAID SHE HATED MAGIC, GISELLE SURE PULLED A DISAPPEARING ACT ON *US*...

WELL, WHAT WOULD *YOU* DO IF YOUR SISTER SUDDENLY BECAME *GUILD MASTER?*

Oh, I DON'T KNOW... BECOME AMBASSADOR TO THE TANTRIC LANDS?

OKAY, OKAY. SO SHE'S RIDING THAT GRAVY TRAIN ALL THE WAY TO THE END OF THE LINE. SHE COULD'VE INVITED HER *FRIENDS* ALONG.

ACTUALLY, THE GUILD WOULDN'T KNOW A GOOD TIME IF IT JUMPED UP AND BIT 'EM IN THE BACKSIDE.

THAT'S RIGHT, YOU LOUNGE LIZARDS, I'M *BACK!*

HALE AND HEARTY, AND READY TO PARTY!

GISELLE!

MILADY... ⇒SMAK⇐

GUY, YOU CHARMER...

GISELLE, C'MON! YOU GOTTA MEET MY NEW SWEETHEART!

YVES MANION. PLEASURE TO MEET YOU, GISELLE. LORRAINE CURSES YOUR ABSENCE SO MUCH, I FIGURE YOU ***MUST*** BE SOMETHING SPECIAL.

Ooh, THIS ONE HAS ***MANNERS,*** LORRAINE. NOTHING LIKE -- WHAT WAS HIS NAME? PAOLO? YOU KNOW, THE ONE WHO GOT BUSTED —

ANCIENT HISTORY. AND WATCH WHATCHA ***SAY.*** MANION'S A ***COP.***

IT'S ALL RIGHT. I KNOW ALL ABOUT IT. HOW D'YOU THINK LORRAINE AND I ***MET?***

DOES HE MEAN...?

YEP. HE ***ARRESTED*** PAOLO.

WHEN THE GOOD DETECTIVE CAME TO ***QUESTION*** ME, I COULD SEE RIGHT AWAY IT WAS TIME TO TURN A NEW LEAF.

I KNOW A SPEAKEASY THAT'S JUST STARTING TO *JUMP* ABOUT NOW.

HANG ON...

...I HAVE TO HIT THE CROCK O' GOLD FIRST.

BLARN BANK

TOP'VE THE EVENIN' TO YEH! WELCOME TO BLARNEY BANK.

AND YER SECRET WISH, IF YEH PLEASE?

=TT=... A PONY.

I WANT A *PONY.*

PLEASE BE GIVIN' YER *NAME,* ME WEE BONNY LASS.

GISELLE VILLARD.

NAE, LASS, I DON'T THINK THAT'S REALLY YER WISH AT ALL—

IT ***WAS*** BACK WHEN I ***OPENED*** THE ACCOUNT, MY WEE, BONNY ***BONEHEAD!*** JUST GIVE ME MY ***MONEY*** AND SPARE ME THE SMALL TALK!

WHEREVER WE'RE GOING, GUY, THERE BETTER ***NOT*** BE ANYTHING MORE MAGICAL THAN A BOTTOMLESS BOTTLE OF BUBBLY!

WHOA, ANNETTE! YOU SURE YOU SHOULD BE DRIVING?

TAKE THIS BACK TO THE SQUAD ROOM AN' RUN THE TAG NUMBER.

I WANNA KNOW WHO THAT FANCY TWIST IS, AN' HOW SHE'S CONNECTED TO THAT DIRTBAG MANION.

Meep!

PARTY'S ALMOST OVER FER THEM YEGS...

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MY *SISTER'S* KIDS. PROMISED I'D LOOK AFTER THEM TODAY: SHE'S HAVING A FRIEND FOR *LUNCH.*

TRY TO *IGNORE* THEM. IT'S NOT THE FIRST TIME I'VE DONE BUSINESS IN FRONT OF THE FAMILY.

YOU'RE *IT!*

AND *CALM DOWN,* MY BOY. YOU'RE ALWAYS SO *UPTIGHT* WHEN YOU VISIT.

MAYBE TAKE UP A *HOBBY?* I'D BE A NERVOUS WRECK WITHOUT MY GARDEN...

WANNA *PLAY?*

...

NO THANKS.

Er...I'M FINE, DUKE. I WAS JUST A LITTLE AFRAID YOU WERE *UPSET* OR SOMETHING WHEN YOU CALLED.

WHY WOULD I BE UPSET WITH *YOU,* DETECTIVE MANION?

YOU'RE A GOOD CONNECTION, AND AN EVEN BETTER *EARNER.* THESE THINGS I *VALUE.*

YOU CAN *ADD* TO THAT VALUE BY PROVIDING ME WITH WHAT COULD VERY WELL BE YOUR GREATEST SCORE EVER.

NAMELY A CERTAIN *GIRL* YOU'VE BEEN SPENDING TIME WITH.

...LORRAINE...?

SURE, DUKE. SHE'S *YOURS.* BUT...?

DON'T BE SILLY, MANION. I WAS REFERRING TO THE GUILD MASTER'S SISTER...

...GISELLE VILLARD.

CHOK

JAZZRATS

YOU *SURE* SHE'S HERE? I MEAN, WE HAVEN'T SEEN HER IN A *WEEK*, SO WHY SHOULD SHE MAKE IT EASY FOR US *NOW?*

TRUST me, kid...

GOTTA HAND IT TO YOU, 'ELLE, THIS PLACE *IS* THE LIVING END!

JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT YOU'D *WORN OUT* EVERY CLUB IN TOWN, eh?

THIERRY!

Um...HI. IT'S GOOD TO --

HEY, GIRLS! *THIS* IS THE GUY I WAS TELLING YOU ABOUT!

THIERRY CHEVALIER...

...MEET THE BEST PARTY-PALS A GIRL EVER HAD...

...*LORRAINE, GUY* AND *ANNETTE!*

NO WONDER YOU HID HIM FROM US, GISELLE. HE'S A *DISH.*

HERE, HERE.

AND SUCH AN *INNOCENT* SPARKLE IN HIS EYE!

WE'LL SOON FIX *THAT.*

...THANKS...

WOW. SO *YOU'RE* THE INFAMOUS "*GOOD-TIME GANG*"...

C'mon, kid. You can't pull *HER* out of the quicksand if you're in up to your *OWN* neck...

SORRY, I'M SO LATE, BUT THOSE CROOKS AREN'T GOING TO CATCH THEMSELVES!

MANION! WHO *SAYS* THERE'S NEVER A COP AROUND WHEN YOU NEED ONE?

DIDJA BRING YOUR HANDCUFFS, SWEETIE?

HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA

Great. Now there's a *SHARK* in the quicksand...

SEVEN SPIRITS...I HAVEN'T STAYED OUT ALL NIGHT SINCE ART SCHOOL...

CONSIDER THIS ***NIGHT SCHOOL***. YOU HAVE THE VERY ***BEST*** PROFESSORS, DARLING. CLASS MEETS AGAIN AT MIDNIGHT. TOODLES!

I'M FAMISHED.

WANNA COME UP FOR A NIBBLE?

HONESTLY... I'D RATHER ***TALK,*** NOW THAT WE ***FINALLY*** HAVE A MINUTE TO OURSELVES. I'VE BEEN, WELL...

I'M ***WORRIED*** ABOUT YOU, GISELLE. YOU DISAPPEAR FOR DAYS AT A TIME, AND YOU HAVE TO ADMIT YOU'VE BEEN ACTING... ***DIFFERENT.***

I ***CARE*** ABOUT YOU. I WANT TO KNOW IF YOU'RE—

CLAUDE, PLEASE HAIL THIS ***BOY*** A TAXI. AND WHILE HE'S WAITING, PLEASE ***EXPLAIN*** TO HIM WHAT *"DOUBLE-ENTENDRE"* MEANS.

SKITTER? ARE YOU HERE? I SAW YOU HANGING AROUND LAST NIGHT, BUT I LOST TRACK OF YOU AFTER WE LEFT--

-- JAZZRAT'S...

GISELLE VILLARD? WE HAVE TO TALK—

Meep!

HOLD YER FIRE! I'M A COP!

FOR CRYIN' OUT LOUD! MY SOURCES SAID YOU *HATE* MAGIC...

WHAT ARE YOU DOING *INSIDE* MY HOME, *UN*INVITED?

TRYING TA *SAVE* YOUR SISTER'S HASH.

COME AGAIN?

YOUR FRIEND, LORRAINE. HER NEW BOYFRIEND, YVES MANION, IS A DETECTIVE ON THE NOUVEAU CITY *VICE* SQUAD.

MY NAME'S *DEVEREAUX*. I'M IN *INTERNAL AFFAIRS*. DO YOU KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS?

746

IT MEANS YOU INVESTIGATE...

...*OTHER* POLICE...

...Oh, POOR LORRAINE...

POOR LORRAINE, MY FOOT. I BEEN TAILIN' MANION FOR MONTHS. YOUR SWANKY FRIENDS HELPED HIM MAKE SOME UPPER-CRUST CONNECTIONS.

Uh-uh. THEY'D NEVER HURT ANYONE. ALL THEY DO IS HAVE FUN—

WITH A LOTTA RITZY PEOPLE WHO LIKE THE OCCASIONAL SNOOTFUL OF PIXIE-DUST, CUZ THEY GOT MORE MONEY THAN BRAINS.

MANION'S GOT HIS FINGER IN EVERY DIRT-PIE IN TOWN. YER FRIENDS JUST HELPED HIM OPEN A NEW MARKET WITH VERY DEEP POCKETS.

I DON'T KNOW IF THEY KNEW WHAT THEY WERE DOING. THEN AGAIN, I DON'T CARE. I'LL WORRY ABOUT IT AFTER I MAKE THE ARRESTS.

WHAT YOU NEED TO WORRY ABOUT IS HOW IT WOULD LOOK IF THE NEWS GOT OUT THAT THE GUILD MASTER'S SISTER IS SO CHUMMY WITH THE SCUM OF THE CITY. YOU WANT THAT HAPPENIN'?

...NO.

SMART GIRL.

AND IF I DO THIS FOR YOU, MY FRIENDS ARE OFF THE HOOK?

ALL I CAN PROMISE IS WE'LL KEEP FROM DRAGGIN' THE GUILD MASTER'S NAME THROUGH THE MUD.

WHATEVER HAPPENS TO YOUR PALS DEPENDS ON HOW GUILTY THEY REALLY ARE, SO YOU GOT NOTHIN' TO WORRY ABOUT, RIGHT?

WEAR THIS WHEN YOU GO OUT WITH THEM TONIGHT. I'LL BE LISTENING IN ON THE OTHER END.

GET MANION TO TALK BUSINESS. YOU GET ME SOMETHING USEFUL, AND THE D.A. WILL KEEP YOUR NAME OFF THE RECORD WHEN IT ALL GOES TO TRIAL.

I WILL *NOT* SIT DOWN, GUY! THIS IS *IMPORTANT!*

EVERYBODY, *LISTEN!* THIS SO-CALLED *TUNNEL OF LOVE* IS *DEFECTIVE!*

Y'KNOW, IT WAS CUTE AT FIRST, BUT DON'T THEY EVER GIVE IT A *REST?*

I AM *STILL SINGLE,* AN' I WANT MY MONEY *BACK!*

HELLO...? GISELLE..?

...YEAH... REAL CUTE...

OKAY, GISELLE... WHATEVER'S ON YOUR MIND, IT SURE ISN'T *ME.* HAVE A GOOD TIME— I'M OUT OF HERE.

THIERRY, WHERE'RE YOU GOING?! THE NIGHT'S STILL YOUNG!

COME BACK! I PROMISE I'LL BEHAVE!

THE LEAST THAT BOY COULD'VE DONE IS DROP OFF LORRAINE ON HIS WAY BACK HOME TO MAMA.

'M FINE...

DETECTIVE MANION...

...I'LL THANK YOU TO KEEP COMMENTS LIKE THAT TO YOURSELF. THIERRY'S MORE OF A MAN THAN YOU KNOW.

IN FACT, THERE'S A FEW *OTHER* THINGS YOU DO THAT WE SHOULD SPEAK ABOUT... *PRIVATELY,* IF YOU DON'T MIND.

CAPITAL IDEA. THERE'S ACTUALLY SOMETHING I'VE NEEDED TO ASK *YOU* ABOUT...

MY, AREN'T *WE* MYSTERIOUS?

YEAH, WHAT GIVES?

YOU TWO LOOK AFTER LORRAINE FOR A MINUTE?

I KNOW ALL ABOUT YOUR DIRTY BUSINESS, MANION. I WANT YOU TO LEAVE MY FRIENDS OUT OF IT.

FAIR ENOUGH. THERE'S NOT MUCH ***MORE*** THEY CAN DO FOR ME, ANYWAY.

Oh, THEY'VE OPENED A FEW DOORS, AND LORRAINE'S A SWEET DIVERSION, ***BUT...***

...LET'S FACE IT. THIS BUNCH IS ***ANYTHING*** BUT DISCREET. AND DISCRETION IS ***KEY*** IN MY LINE OF WORK...

...JUST AS IT IS IN YOUR ***SISTER'S***. HOW POPULAR DO YOU THINK SHE'D BE IF PEOPLE FOUND OUT THE SORT OF ***DEPRAVITY*** THAT GOES ON, RIGHT UNDER HER NOSE?

IF YOU'RE ***THREATENING*** GEN...

*I'M OFFERING YOU THE CHANCE TO **PERSONALLY** MAKE SURE ANY SCANDAL **STAYS** OUT OF THE PUBLIC EYE.*

THAT'S IT, GIRL, GET 'IM TO SHOW YOU THE GOODS...

*SEE, CRIME IS LIKE A **CHRONIC DISEASE**. YOU CAN NEVER HOPE TO **CURE** IT, BUT YOU **CAN** KEEP THE SYMPTOMS FROM SHOWING.*

YOU'VE BEEN AROUND THE BLOCK, GIRL. YOU ***KNOW*** WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT.

ALL I'M ASKING IS THAT YOU ***MEET*** SOME OF MY ASSOCIATES, SEE FOR YOURSELF HOW MUCH ***GOOD*** YOU CAN DO FOR YOUR SISTER...AND FOR ***YOURSELF.***

NOW GET LOST.

SORRY, PAL, BUT YOU CAN'T JUST *DROP IN* ON THE GUILD MASTER AT THIS HOUR OF NIGHT, EVEN IF YOU ARE HER FRIEND!

CALL THE VIZIER'S SECRETARY TOMORROW AND TRY TO SCHEDULE AN APPOINTMENT. Heh.

TOLD YOU IT WOULDN'T WORK.

It was just a formality, kid.

Sometimes you gotta ask nicely, even if you already know you'll have to go with "Plan B"...

...or "Plan Skitter," if you prefer.

WH--?

I KNEW THERE WAS MORE TO YOU THAN MEETS THE EYE, BUT HOW DID YOU..?

Aw, *NO*--HER CLOTHES. SKITTER, GET US OUT OF HERE FAST! IF GEN WALKS BACK IN HERE *INDECENT*...

Too late!

AAHHH!

THIERRY?!

WHAT IN THE INFERNAL PLANES ARE YOU AND SKITTER *DOING* HERE?

IT'S *GISELLE*. MORE TO THE POINT, IT'S THOSE HORRIBLE *PEOPLE* SHE HANGS OUT WITH--

HOLD ON...

RATS. I DIDN'T MEAN TO VANISH THE *ICE CREAM*...

SORRY IF I RATTLED YOU, GEN. IT'S ABOUT YOUR SISTER. HAVE YOU NOTICED A *CHANGE* IN HER?

HOW SO?

WELL...SHE'S REALLY MOODY AND SELFISH. DISAPPEARS FOR DAYS AT A TIME.

STAYS OUT ALL NIGHT LONG WITH LORRAINE, GUY AND--

ANNETTE. I'VE *MET* THEM.

ACTUALLY, IT SOUNDS LIKE GISELLE IS BACK TO *NORMAL*.

No, honey. This is more serious than it looks.

GISELLE?

GISELLE, WE NEED TO SPEAK.

OKAY, BUT COULD YOU COME HERE FOR A CHANGE? THAT NOWHERE-PLACE YOU SPOOKS LIVE IN GIVES ME A ***HEADACHE.***

IS THAT ***REALLY*** WHY YOU WON'T COME TO THE SPIRIT PLANE?

WHAT ARE YOU GETTING AT?

YOU'RE AVOIDING US BECAUSE YOU KNOW YOU'RE BEHAVING POORLY.

THE SELF-INDULGENT NIGHTS OUT, THE HAIR-TRIGGER TEMPER...

YOU VERY NEARLY ***KILLED*** THAT CONSTABLE JUST FOR STARTLING YOU.

YOU ***SAW*** THAT, huh?

WE SEE ***EVERYTHING*** YOU DO. AND I HAVE TO TELL YOU, THE OTHER GUILD SPIRITS ARE EXPRESSING DOUBTS ABOUT YOUR WORTHINESS--

SO WHAT ***ELSE*** IS NEW? YOU SPIRITS HAVE BEEN LOOKING FOR A WAY OUT EVER SINCE THE DAY YOU GOT STUCK WITH ME.

NOT TRUE. YOU'VE SHOWN GREAT POTENTIAL, BUT NOW YOU ARE BACKSLIDING. AND SHOULD YOU CHOOSE TO ***ALLY*** YOURSELF WITH THAT ***CRIMINAL***...

YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW ***WHY*** I AGREED TO MEET WITH HIM TONIGHT.

*I AM MORE CONCERNED WITH WHAT HE **WANTS** FROM YOU. WOULD HE PRESUME THAT YOU HAVE SOME **INFLUENCE** IN THE NOUVEAU GUILD WHEN YOU AREN'T EVEN A **MEMBER**?*

PROBABLY NOT.

DID YOU REVEAL YOUR MYSTIC ABILITIES TO HIM IN ANY WAY?

IF YOU'RE ALWAYS WATCHING, THEN YOU ***KNOW*** I DIDN'T.

SOMEHOW, THIS MAN, OR SOMEONE HE ANSWERS TO, IS AWARE OF YOUR INNER DISHARMONY.

IF YOU ALLOW HIM TO FURTHER UNBALANCE YOU, DUTY WILL COMPEL US TO WITHHOLD OUR COUNSEL FROM YOU.

IT'S A ***TEMPTING,*** THOUGHT: TO NEVER AGAIN HEAR ALL OF YOU ***YAKKING*** INSIDE MY MIND. BUT YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE BOTHERED WITH THE ULTIMATUM.

I AGREED TO MEET MANION--AWAY FROM MY FRIENDS--SO THAT I COULD ***DESTROY*** HIM.

HE'S TRYING TO ***USE*** ME. AND AFTER WHAT I'VE BEEN THROUGH THE LAST FEW MONTHS, THAT'S THE ***WORST*** MISTAKE ANYONE COULD MAKE.

SHE'LL *BE* HERE, I'M *SURE* OF IT.

SHE *BETTER*. I CAN'T *REMEMBER* WHEN THE BOSS WUZ THIS *INNERESTED* IN SOMEBODY.

DON'TCHA THINK YOU'RE *RUSHING* IT, THOUGH? SHOWIN' HER THE OPERATION RIGHT AWAY WON'T BE TOO SHOCKING?

BELIEVE ME, SHE'S NO INNOCENT. THE SOONER SHE'S IN TOO DEEP, THE MORE COOPERATIVE SHE'LL BE.

BOSS! I THINK YER GUEST'S HERE.

DETECTIVE DEVEREAUX, LISTEN CLOSELY: I AM HERE FOR MY *OWN* REASONS. I'M *NOT* DOING THIS FOR *YOU*.

YOU SEEM LIKE A GOOD MAN, SO I'M GIVING YOU THE BENEFIT OF A *WARNING:* DON'T GET IN MY WAY.

WHAT HAPPENS *NEXT* IS NOT FOR YOUR EARS.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT IS ALL *MINE!*

WHAT IN THE--?

SORRY I'M LATE, DETECTIVE MANION.

SHHRRRIPP

HOW'S SHE CASTIN' *SPELLS* WITHOUT SAYIN' 'EM *OUT LOUD?!*

NO *WONDER* THE DUKE WANTS YOU...!

KEEP HER *BUSY*, BOYS!

I MIGHT HAVE SOMETHING BACK HERE THAT CAN *HOLD HER OFF!*

EXIT

EXIT

LET'S *DANCE*, TOOTS!

NOT BY THE *HORN* ON YOUR CHINNY-CHIN-CHIN.

RRAAHH!

EXIT

ALL RIGHT, MANION, IT'S JUST *YOU* AND—

--WHAT IN THE INFERNAL PLANES ARE *THEY* DOING HERE?!

THEY *WORK* FOR ME, YOU IDIOT! THEY'VE BEEN RUNNING PIXIE DUST FOR MONTHS. *SEEING* THEM WAS SUPPOSED TO MAKE YOU FEEL MORE *AT EASE* ABOUT JOINING THE OPERATION!

BUT I GUESS YOU WERE HIDING AS BIG A SECRET FROM *US* AS WE WERE FROM *YOU!*

YVES, WHAT ARE YOU *DOING...?*

MAKING IT *HARDER* ON HIMSELF.

NO...

WHAMM

GUYS, YOU HAVE TO GET OUT ***NOW***. THE ***COPS*** WILL BE HERE ANY SECOND.

G-GET ***AWAY*** FROM US. SEVEN SPIRITS, GISELLE... WHAT'S ***HAPPENED*** TO YOU...?

I WAS JUST WONDERING THE SAME THING ABOUT ***YOU***.

DEVEREAUX? YOU CAME ***ALONE***?

I STARTED OVER HERE THE MOMENT YOU BROKE OUR CONNECTION. BACKUP OUGHTTA BE RIGHT BEHIND ME.

GOOD. THEY CAN ARREST THIS BUNCH. YOU'LL NEED AN AMBULANCE FOR MANION.

WHAT'D ***HE*** DO TO EARN THE EXTRA LUMPS?

HE THREATENED MY SISTER AND MY FRIENDS.

YOU SHOULD KEEP THAT IN MIND.

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UNACCEPTABLE!

I ALWAYS SAID THIS GIRL WOULD BE A FLAWED VESSEL FOR ANY **ONE** OF US.

WE COURT **DISASTER** BY ENTRUSTING HER WITH **ALL** OF OUR WISDOM!

SO IT WOULD SEEM. AND YET SHE HAS BESTED OUR GREATEST ENEMY MORE THAN ONCE.

TRUE...

BUT SINCE HER LAST VICTORY OVER ANIMORA, HER BEHAVIOR HAS BEEN NOTHING SHORT OF **FRIVOLOUS.**

YOU SAY THAT LIKE IT'S A **BAD** THING...

I FIND IT ODD THAT HER MOST ARDENT SUPPORTER HAS YET TO **SPEAK UP.**

THAT'S BECAUSE I FEAR THE MAGUS MAY BE **RIGHT.**

IF THIS KEEPS UP, WE MAY HAVE A MORAL OBLIGATION TO **WITHHOLD** OUR SORCERY FROM HER.

TRULY IT IS A FELL SIGN, LeCAVALIER, WHEN THE TWO OF **US** AGREE.

I STILL BELIEVE THAT WHEN SHE IS PUT TO THE TEST, GISELLE IS ALL WE CAN ASK OF IN A CHAMPION.

THE PROBLEM IS THAT WITH NO FOE TO CHALLENGE HER, SHE IS HER **OWN** WORST ENEMY.

LET US WITHHOLD OUR FINAL JUDGMENT UNTIL SHE HAS FACED HER **NEXT** TEST.

CONSIDERING HOW SHE SEEMS TO BE **LOOKING** FOR TROUBLE, IT SHOULDN'T BE LONG...

I *INSIST* ON COMING IN WITH YOU, MASTER VILLARD.

NO. YOU WILL *STAY* IN THE CAR, AND YOU WILL *OMIT* THIS LITTLE TRIP FROM YOUR DAILY REPORT. THAT'S AN *ORDER.*

HE'S JUST TRYING TO DO HIS *JOB,* GEN.

WE'RE LOOKING FOR MY SISTER, NOT GOING TO WAR.

YOU WERE *SAYING...?*

JACK W

YOU TWO *CHECKING UP* ON ME?

HAVE A SEAT. I JUST TIDIED UP.

GISELLE, WHAT'S GOING ON? ARE YOU TRYING TO GET ***ARRESTED?***

THERE WERE A FEW RUDE GUYS HERE, THAT'S ALL.

WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR ***BUDDIES?*** LORRAINE, ANNETTE... ***THOSE*** GUYS?

DIDN'T YOU HEAR? TURNS OUT THEY'VE BEEN DEALING ***PIXIE DUST.***

NOT THE RIGHT SET FOR A GIRL TO BE ***SEEN*** WITH--LEAST OF ALL THE GUILD MASTER'S SISTER. RIGHT, GEN?

GISELLE, I'M SORRY ABOUT YOUR FRIENDS. BUT THIS KIND OF BEHAVIOR ISN'T MUCH BETTER. I REALLY THINK YOU SHOULD--

SHUSH, GEN. I'M JUST HAVING A DRINK. NO BIG DEAL, RIGHT, PEDRO?

DO YOU ***MIND?*** THE LADY AND ME ARE TRYIN' TO HAVE A ***MOMENT*** HERE!

MONUMENTAL WASTE OF TIME. I'M SORRY, GEN.

YOU WANT TO GET SOME BREAKFAST? I DON'T FEEL LIKE BEING ALONE.

You two go ahead. I'm gonna just keep an eye on our girl.

THANKS FOR STICKIN' UP FOR ME, PEDRO. YOU'RE A GOOD LITTLE PAL...

HOW 'BOUT A *KISS?*

WHAT DO *YOU* WANT?

Kid, if I'm gonna let you keep making an ass of yourself, the LEAST I can do is make sure you keep your eyes open.

WHAT DO YOU *MEAN?*

I mean that thing on your palm is a TROUBLE MAGNET, so you better look out for anything STRANGE.

Like, say, in the MIRROR over there.

!

SO, WERE YOU EVER GOING TO *INTRODUCE* YOURSELF? OR JUST FOLLOW ME AROUND FOR A FEW DAYS, *THEN* TRY TO KILL ME?

WELL MET, SIGIL-BEARER.

OBVIOUSLY, I UNDERESTIMATED YOUR POWERS OF PERCEPTION. REST ASSURED I HAVE *NO* INTENTION OF HARMING YOU.

YEAH, RIGHT. THE LAST GUY I MET WHO WORE THAT LITTLE *SYMBOL* SAID THE SAME THING. HIS WAS ON A *RING.*

BUT I'M SURE YOU KNOW ALL ABOUT *DARROW.*

Er...

WHERE *IS* HE? HE WASN'T *THERE* WHEN I KILLED ANIMORA...!

WHERE IS DARROW?!

UNHAND ME!

I DO NOT SERVE *THE BETRAYER*. YOU HAVE *NO IDEA* WHAT YOU RISK!

NO... YOU *DON'T* SERVE DARROW, DO YOU?

YOU... SERVE SOMETHING CALLED...

...SOMETHING... CALLED...

...HOUSE... *SINISTER...?*

EXACTLY HOW MUCH *DID* AHRROH REVEAL TO YOU WHEN YOU WERE IN HIS THRALL?

I DIDN'T GET THAT FROM HIM...

I'M NOT SURE *WHERE* THAT CAME FROM, BUT LET'S SEE WHAT *ELSE* I CAN COME UP WITH!

=URK=

PLOOSH

REIN IT IN, kid! This is one fight you DON'T wanna pick!

Eh?

YOU INSIGNIFICANT LITTLE PRIMATE! I CARE NOT WHAT GIFT OF POWER FELL IN YOUR LAP, YOU WILL *NOT* INSULT MY LADY BY ATTACKING HER AGENT!

YES...YOUR *LADY...*

THE LADY...

...INGRA!

IF THE HATEFUL HAG WANTS TO KNOW SO *BADLY,* LET HER SEE *IN PERSON* HOW FAR I HAVE COME.

=NNF=... NO...

TAKE ME TO HER!

I...I *CAN'T...!*

YOU MEAN YOU ***WON'T!*** DIDN'T SHE ***WARN*** YOU WHAT I CAN ***DO*** TO YOU SO-CALLED GODS?

Aw, c'mon, GISELLE! Ya can't go drainin' the life out of EVERY weirdo ya meet--! It ain't LADYLIKE!

YOUR CHOICE: TAKE ME TO INGRA...

...OR THE ***NEXT*** LAPDOG SHE SENDS WON'T FIND ANYTHING LEFT OF ***YOU*** BUT A DRIED-OUT ***HUSK.***

NO!

...GREAT LADY... ⇒NFF⇐...

...⇒GHH⇐... FORGIVE ME.

ON THE CONTRARY, FAITHFUL SNIQ. YOU SHALL BE *REWARDED*...

...FOR I HAVE BEEN MOST EAGER TO MEET *THIS* PARTICULAR *SIGIL-BEARER.*

INGRA.

HOW IS IT THAT I KNOW YOUR *NAME* WHEN WE'VE NEVER EVEN *MET* BEFORE?

I HAVE MY *SUSPICIONS*, BUT I MUST HEAR WHAT *ELSE* YOU KNOW OF ME BEFORE I AM SURE.

OKAY. YOU'RE THE QUEEN-OR-WHATEVER OF *"HOUSE SINISTER,"* WHICH MEANS YOU PRETTY MUCH *RULE* HALF OF YOUR PEOPLE...

YOU CALL YOURSELVES THE...

...THE *FIRST.*

SEVEN SPIRITS, HOW DO I ***KNOW*** THIS STUFF?! AND ***WHY...***

...WHY DO I ***HATE*** YOU SO MUCH?!

MY DEAR GIRL, YOU ARE ON ***ELYSIA*** NOW-- CROWN JEWEL OF ***CREATION...***

...HOW COULD A FEELING AS UGLY AS HATRED STILL FLICKER WITHIN YOU WHEN FACED WITH SUCH ***BEAUTY?***

Oh... Oh, MY...

COME, CHILD, AND WALK AMONG *GODS*...

I REGRET THAT AHRROH AND ANIMORA WERE SUCH AN ***UNFORTUNATE*** INTRODUCTION FOR YOU TO MY KIND.

THEY ARE PETTY, UNWORTHY GODLINGS. A ***DISGRACE,*** REALLY.

I AM ***INTRIGUED*** BY THE STRANGE MIX OF ***ENERGIES*** WITHIN YOU.

THE SCENT OF ANIMORA IS STRONGEST UPON YOU, WHICH IS TO BE EXPECTED, CONSIDERING HOW SOON IT IS SINCE YOUR LAST BATTLE.

BUT I ALSO SENSE ***OTHER*** ENERGIES, OTHER ***SOULS,*** BOUND TO YOUR OWN.

GISELLE! YOU MUST LEAVE THIS PLACE AT ONCE! SUCH SIGHTS WEREN'T MEANT FOR US!

BAD COUNSEL, LITTLE GHOST. I'LL THANK YOU NOT TO STAND BETWEEN THIS GIRL AND THE DESTINY I OFFER HER.

YOU CAN SEE THEM?

THERE IS LITTLE THAT ESCAPES MY NOTICE.

I CAN FREE YOU OF THEIR CHATTER IN YOUR HEAD. I CAN SHOW YOU HOW TO FINALLY BE YOUR OWN WOMAN...

...IF YOU'LL HELP ME UNLOCK THE RIDDLE OF THIS MARK ON YOUR PALM.

I...

WILL...

...NEVER!

I WILL *NEVER* SERVE YOU! *I WILL BE AVENGED!*

FUNNY, BUT FOR A MOMENT YOU DIDN'T QUITE *SOUND* LIKE YOURSELF.

HELLO...? WHO *ELSE* IS IN THERE, *HMMM...?*

WH... WHAT ARE YOU *TALKING* ABOUT?!

I SPEAK OF SHE WHO *COMPELLED* YOU TO COME HERE...

...WHO SENT A *GIRL* TO FACE THE *QUEEN OF STORMS*...

...THE *HEART OF WRATH*...

...WHILE SHE *HIDES* BACK ON YOUR HOMEWORLD!

WRAK

Ohh... WHAT'S...

...WHAT'S HAPPENING...?

RRMMMBLE

PREPARE YOURSELF, SIGIL-BEARER OF CIRESS.

TODAY YOU FACE THE MIGHTIEST FOE IMAGINABLE!

ON A *THOUSAND* WORLDS JUST LIKE YOURS I AM A *LEGEND* SPOKEN OF IN WHISPERED *FEAR.*

=WHLP=

THOOM

RRMMMBLLMMBLLLE

KRAKOOM

A *BATTLEGROUND* I PREPARED IN ANTICIPATION OF YOUR COMING. WE WERE NEVER *ON* ELYSIA.

.. THE BUILDINGS ..THE *PEOPLE*...

...WHERE...?

DID YOU THINK I WOULD RISK DAMAGING *PARADISE?*

YOU REALLY SHOULD *THANK* ME, GISELLE!

I AM ABOUT TO DO YOU A GREAT *FAVOR*...

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WHAT'S HAPPENING *NOW*? IS SHE STILL ALIVE?!

BE SILENT, DARROW. THE CONNECTION IS TENUOUS...

ANIMORA, BE *FAIR!* I HAVE HIDDEN PATIENTLY FOR WEEKS IN THIS RAT-HOLE!

MY SOLE ENTERTAINMENT HAS BEEN WATCHING THE WALLPAPER *PEEL* WHILE *YOU* GET TO PULL GISELLE'S STRINGS!

NOW THAT OUR PLAN'S REACHED ITS MOMENT OF TRUTH, ALL THAT I ASK IS FOR YOU TO SHARE THE *VIEW*...

VERY WELL...

...WHATEVER SHUTS YOU UP...

BY THE *EIDOLON RIFT!* SHE'S REALLY *DOING* IT...!

SHE'S ACTUALLY TAKING ON *INGRA!*

YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW GOOD THIS FEELS! HOW ***REFRESHINGLY*** UNCOMPLICATED!

IF ONLY FOR A MOMENT, TO ***SET ASIDE*** THE POLITICS AND PRAGMATISM...

...THE ARTFUL TOOLS OF QUEENCRAFT...

...AND ENJOY THE ***SIMPLE PLEASURE*** OF SOLVING A PROBLEM--

--WITH MY FISTS!

IS THAT THE *BEST* YOU CAN MUSTER, YOU *WINDBAG*?

BECAUSE IF YOU HAD EVEN A *SHRED* OF COURAGE, YOU COULD HAVE TRADED BLOWS WITH ME ANY TIME YOU *WANTED*...

...INSTEAD OF *BANISHING* ME LIKE THE *COWARD* YOU ARE!

DOES ANYONE NEED FURTHER PROOF?

NO, MAGUS, IT IS ABUNDANTLY CLEAR THAT OUR **HOST** IS NO LONGER HERSELF.

THAT **SIGIL** ON HER PALM IS A **DOUBLE-EDGED** WEAPON.

YESSS...SOMEHOW IT...**INFECTED** GISELLE WITH THE DEMON QUEEN'S OWN DARK **INTENT**.

THEN WE HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO **DENY** HER OUR SUPPORT, LEST WE FURTHER ANIMORA'S AMBITIONS.

IT MUST BE **UNANIMOUS**. LET NOT ONE OF US DODGE RESPONSIBILITY IF WE ABANDON THIS GIRL TO **DIE**.

THEN YOU HAVE NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT, HEROTUS, BECAUSE THE VOTE **IS** UNANIMOUS.

THOUGH IT BREAKS MY HEART TO ADMIT IT, GISELLE HAS BEEN **TAINTED** BEYOND REDEMPTION.

I ONLY PRAY THAT HER DEATH IS SWIFT AND PAINLESS...AND THAT IT FREES US FROM OUR **BONDAGE** TO HER ACCURSED MARK OF POWER.

I'M FINALLY GOING TO *RIP* THAT SMUG SMILE OFF YOUR *FACE!*

YOU DON'T EVEN REALIZE WHAT YOU'RE UP AGAINST! YOU'RE ABOUT TO *LEARN* WHAT THE SIGIL CAN DO TO ONE OF *THE FIRST!*

BY ALL MEANS, *SHOW ME.*

ALL THE POWER IN THE *UNIVERSE* CAN'T SAVE YOU NOW! IN FACT, THE STRONGER *YOU* ARE, THE STRONGER YOU'LL MAKE *ME!*

FWASH

→NNF←...YES...THIS IS THE PART WHERE I'M SUPPOSED TO *WITHER* AS YOU DRAIN THE STRENGTH FROM MY LIMBS, RIGHT?

WHAT--? WHY AREN'T YOU...?

YOU'VE BEEN IN EXILE TOO LONG, ANIMORA, ELSE YOU'D *KNOW* THAT A SIGIL-BEARER RECENTLY CAME TO FAIR ELYSIA.

WATCHING HIM STEAL POWER FROM OTHERS REMINDED ME OF HOW *WE* GRANT ENERGY TO MORTAL *UNDERLINGS.*

BUT HAVE YOU EVER *RESCINDED* POWER FROM A PARTICULARLY *WILLFUL* UNDERLING?

FIZZLE

IT WAS NO GREAT RISK, PITTING MY *WILL* AGAINST THE *SIGIL*--

--FOR *MY* WILL IS *BOUNDLESS!*

OR HAD YOU *FORGOTTEN* THE TRUE MEASURE OF MY OWN POWER?

I AM ONE OF THE *FIRST-CREATED!* EVEN AMONG *GODS* I REIGN SUPREME!

I, AH...

SPIRITS! *HELP* ME!

SPIRITS...? ANSWER! WHY CAN'T I *FEEL* YOU ANYMORE?

ANIMORA, THIS IS BENEATH EVEN *YOU.*

THAT *TRINKET* ON YOUR PALM MAY THREATEN MY MINIONS, BUT *NOT* ME! *NOT* THE MOTHER OF FURIES!

BEGGING LONG-DEAD HUMANS TO *SAVE* YOU...?

INGRAHHHH!

ALTWAALS CURSED *EYES*...

WHAT?! WHAT HAPPENED?

SHE'S *GONE*, DARROW. THE LINK IS *BROKEN*.

I MADE HER EXPEND *ALL* OF THE POWER SHE TOOK FROM *ME*...

...AND MY *CONTROL* OVER HER WENT WITH IT. LET'S HOPE THAT LAST BLAST WAS *ENOUGH*.

...HNN... HNN...

...oh...

...oh, NO...

WHAT AM I...

...WHAT AM I *DOING*...?

WHAT WAS I *THINKING*...?

YOU *WEREN'T.*

SHE HAS DONE MOST OF YOUR THINKING ***FOR*** YOU FOR QUITE SOME TIME.

AND NOW YOU'VE BURNED HER ***OUT*** OF YOUR SYSTEM. ***GOOD*** FOR YOU.

BUT YOU'VE ALSO STOKED THE ***FIRES*** OF MY WRATH. ***BAD*** FOR YOU...

...BECAUSE NOW I'LL NOT BE ***SATISFIED***...

...UNTIL I TEAR YOU TO PIECES!

FRAKT

SHRAKT

KRAKOOM

SPIRITS! *TALK* TO ME!

"...YOU *DID* SAY YOU WANTED IT *WELL-DONE*..."

...IS BURNED TO A CRISP OKAY?

THAT'S OKAY, GEN. DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT. I GUESS WE SHOULD HAVE WOKEN UP ONE OF YOUR *CHEFS*...

BUT I WANTED TO DO SOMETHING NICE FOR YOU *MYSELF!*

I MEAN...YOU'VE BEEN SO NICE TO *ME*. AND YOU'VE PUT UP WITH SO MUCH FROM *GISELLE*...

TELL YOU WHAT: IF *YOU* DON'T MENTION YOUR SISTER FOR THE REST OF THE NIGHT, *I'LL* PAY FOR BREAKFAST WHEN WE ORDER IT IN.

THERE'S A PHONE *UPSTAIRS*...

SPIRITS, PLEASE--! SHE'S GONNA KILL ME!

ALAIN! HEROTUS! SOMEBODY! WHY WON'T YOU ANSWER?!

ALAIN?!

PERHAPS WE SHOULD CLOSE THE SCRYING PORTAL?

NO. THE LEAST WE CAN DO IS FACE THE CONSEQUENCE OF OUR DECISION.

WHAT IS *WRONG* WITH YOU GUYS?! I *TOLD* YOU SHE'S *KILLING ME!*

I NEED YOUR *HELP—*

HALT! WE WILL AID YOU NO *MORE!*

DARROW'S FOOL. ANIMORA'S PUPPET. WHO WOULD BE NEXT TO MISUSE THE POWER WE SHARED WITH YOU?

BUT I'M *ME* AGAIN! DON'T YOU *SEE?!* ANIMORA'S HOLD ON ME IS *GONE!*

NOT EXACTLY.

COME HERE AND I'LL *EXPLAIN...*

⇒WHEEZE⇐

POP

⇒WHUNG⇐

SHE NO LONGER *CONTROLS* YOU--

ANIMORA *IS* STILL *LINKED* TO YOU!

THERE -- THE *PSYCHIC TETHER* BRIDGING THE GULF BETWEEN YOU...

...A LESSER FIRST MIGHT NOT EVEN *FEEL* IT, BUT *I* CAN USE THAT GOSSAMER STRAND--

⇒UKKH⇐

SHWF

--TO REEL HER IN!

NO! UNGH

IT SHOULD HAVE WORKED! HER SIGIL SHOULD HAVE DRAINED *YOUR* POWER AS IT DID *MINE!*

YOU ARE A *RIVER,* ANIMORA. I AM THE *OCEAN.* WILL YOU NEVER ACCEPT THAT?

Ah, WELL. PLENTY OF TIME TO DISCUSS IT ONCE I GET YOU *HOME.*

WH... WHAT ABOUT... *ME...?*

YOU.

YOU, I ***THANK*** FOR A MOST ***INVIGORATING*** ENCOUNTER.

YOU'RE... ***NOT*** GOING TO KILL ME?

SMEK

THAT WOULD BE A ***WASTE.*** YOU WIELD THE UNIVERSAL ENERGIES WITH EASE AND GRACE BEYOND ANY ***OTHER*** SIGIL-BEARER I'VE OBSERVED.

BESIDES, I ***LIKE*** YOU. WHAT YOU LACK IN GUILE YOU MAKE UP FOR IN PASSION. AND ***PASSION*** IS SOMETHING I REVERE.

UNFORTUNATELY, YOUR MASTERY OVER YOUR OWN LIFE LEAVES ***MUCH*** TO BE DESIRED.

THIS ABOMINATION AND THE ONE YOU KNOW AS DARROW HAVE USED YOU ***REPEATEDLY*** TO FURTHER THEIR OWN ENDS.

DARROW! I'LL—

WASTE NO TIME ON RECRIMINATIONS. I SHALL HAVE DARROW ROUNDED UP ***MYSELF.***

THERE IS ANOTHER, ***GREATER*** THREAT NOW LURKING ON YOUR WORLD.

Oh. AND I SUPPOSE YOU WANT ME TO TAKE CARE OF THIS *"THREAT"* ***FOR YOU...?***

HA! ***I*** REQUIRE ***NOTHING*** FROM YOU.

I HAVE ***LESS*** INTEREST IN BEING YOUR NEXT MASTER THAN YOU WOULD IN EMPLOYING A ***MOSQUITO.***

NO, I HAVE DIVERSION ***ENOUGH*** RIGHT HERE.

AND I DOUBT YOUR WORLD WOULD FARE TOO WELL WERE ***I*** TO COME THERE AND HANDLE THE PROBLEM MYSELF.

NOW IT'S TIME FOR YOU TO GO ***HOME.***

PERHAPS WE SHALL MEET AGAIN UNDER MORE PLEASANT CIRCUMSTANCES.

WAIT A MINUTE

I MERELY HOPE MY WARNING WILL SPUR YOU TO ***FINALLY*** TAKE POSSESSION OF YOURSELF.

THERE IS NOTHING SADDER THAN SQUANDERED POTENTIAL.

THE CHOICE IS YOURS, GISELLE VILLARD. I TRUST YOU'LL VINDICATE MY FAITH IN YOU.

SAY, THERE ARE *OTHER "SIGIL-BEARERS"*?

Huh?

SOMETHING THAT *INGRA* SAID. SHE'S...

...WELL, IT'S A LONG STORY.

Oh, *SKITTER!* IT'S SO *GOOD* TO SEE YOU! I DIDN'T THINK I'D SEE *ANYONE* HERE EVER AGAIN!

=urk= EASY, now! Those are my favorite RIBS!

YOU KNOW HOW DARROW AND ANIMORA CAME FROM *ANOTHER WORLD?* I JUST MET THE...GODDESS WHO RULES THAT PLACE.

I'LL FILL IN THE DETAILS ONCE WE FIND *GENEVIEVE,* BUT THE BOTTOM LINE IS THIS:

THE GUILD SPIRITS *CUT ME OFF.* AND THEY WERE RIGHT TO.

I WAS A MENACE, AND IT WOULD'VE BEEN WRONG FOR THEM TO GO ON... Y'KNOW... ADDING TO MY *POWER.*

BUT I'M *BETTER* NOW, AND I NEED TO *PROVE* THAT TO THE SPIRITS...

...OR THEY'LL NEVER TALK TO ME AGAIN.

MISS VILLARD.

HI, GASTON.

IT'S PAST TIME I GOT SERIOUS AND *LEARNED* WHAT THE GUILDS ARE REALLY ALL ABOUT. GEN CAN GET ME STARTED BY TEACHING ME ALL ABOUT THE *NOUVEAU* GUILD.

HI, FRANÇOIS.

Um, MISS VILLARD. MAYBE YOU SHOULD WAIT UNTIL LATER THIS MORNING--

RELAX, FRANÇOIS. SHE MIGHT BE *GUILD MASTER,* BUT MY SISTER'S DOOR IS *NEVER* CLOSED TO--

-- ME...

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GISELLE! IT'S...IT'S NOT WHAT IT—

YES, IT IS. IT'S *EXACTLY* WHAT IT SEEMS.

...

GEN...?

THIERRY...?

IT JUST SORT OF... *HAPPENED,* GISELLE. WE NEVER MEANT TO HURT YOU.

WHY...

...WHY *NOT?* I'D *DESERVE* IT.

IT'S BEEN WEEKS SINCE I WAS MUCH OF A GIRLFRIEND...OR A *SISTER.*

GISELLE...? SOMETHING HAPPENED TO YOU... *DIDN'T* IT?

YEAH... YOU COULD SAY THAT. WHERE DO I *START...?*

IT ALL GOES BACK TO *ANIMORA*. YOU SAW HER *FORCE* ME TO DRAIN HER ENERGY WITH MY *SIGIL*. AT THE TIME, IT SEEMED LIKE SHE'D UNDERESTIMATED ME...

TURNS OUT SHE HAD HER *REASONS...*

WITH HER GONE, I SPENT THE NEXT FEW WEEKS PARTYING HARDER THAN I EVER HAD. I NEVER EVEN *QUESTIONED* WHY I WAS SUDDENLY ACTING LIKE A *WITCH ON WHEELS.*

THEN I CAUGHT SOMEONE FOLLOWING ME AROUND--SOMEONE FROM THE SAME PLANET OF *GOD-PEOPLE* THAT ANIMORA HERSELF CAME FROM.

I MADE HIM TAKE ME HOME WITH HIM, TO MEET THEIR *QUEEN,* A GODDESS NAMED *INGRA*. THE MINUTE I SAW HER, I PICKED A *FIGHT* WITH HER.

BIG MISTAKE. *HUGE* MISTAKE.

AFTER SHE BEAT THE SNOT OUT OF ME, INGRA SHOWED ME THAT I'D BEEN ANIMORA'S *PUPPET* ALL ALONG. WHEN I DREW IN ALL HER POWER, I HAD SOMEHOW PUT MYSELF UNDER HER CONTROL.

SHE'D HOPED TO USE MY SIGIL AS A *WEAPON* AGAINST INGRA.

ANOTHER BIG MISTAKE.

ANIMORA'S HEAD IS PROBABLY MOUNTED OVER INGRA'S FIREPLACE BY NOW...

INGRA SENT ME HOME WITH A WARNING. SHE SAYS SOME THREAT EVEN ***WORSE*** THAN ANIMORA IS AT WORK HERE ON CIRESS.

WHAT COULD BE WORSE THAN THE ***DEMON QUEEN?***

SHE DIDN'T SAY.

ANY CHANCE SHE WAS JUST ***LYING*** TO GET YOU TO ***DO*** SOMETHING FOR HER?

SURE, WHY NOT? SEEMS LIKE EVER SINCE I GOT THIS DAMN THING ON MY PALM, FOLKS HAVE BEEN LINING UP TO ***USE*** ME...

AND THEN YOU COME HOME TO ***US***...

I'M SO ***SORRY,*** GISELLE. I DIDN'T MEAN TO--

NO, NO. IT'S OKAY. ***REALLY.*** I, uh...

I ACTUALLY THINK YOU TWO ARE A BETTER ***FIT.***

THIERRY, WHATEVER ***WE*** HAD WAS...WELL...I THINK I JUST REALLY LIKED ALL THE ATTENTION, BUT...

IT WASN'T A REAL TWO-WAY STREET. I DIDN'T TREAT ***YOU*** WELL AT ALL.

TO BE HONEST, GEN'S MORE YOUR SPEED. SHE'S, YOU KNOW... ***HEALTHIER.***

SHE HASN'T GOT A HEADFUL OF ***SNAKES,*** LIKE ME.

'ELLE...

NO, ***REALLY,*** GEN. IT'S OKAY. I'VE GOT A LOT OF WORK TO DO ON ***MYSELF*** BEFORE I CAN HAVE SOMEONE ***ELSE*** IN MY LIFE. I THINK I'M OKAY WITH THAT.

ACTUALLY, THAT'S WHY I ***CAME*** HERE IN THE FIRST PLACE.

I NEED YOUR ***HELP.*** THE ***ETERNAL SPIRITS*** GOT SICK OF ME ACTING LIKE AN IDIOT. THEY'VE STOPPED ***TALKING*** TO ME--NOT THAT I BLAME THEM.

I'VE BEEN WALKING AROUND FOR ***MONTHS*** WITH THE GREATEST MAGICAL MINDS EVER KNOWN INSIDE MY HEAD.

NOT ONCE DID I TAKE AN INTEREST IN WHAT THEY HAD TO ***TEACH*** ME...UNLESS IT WAS TO SAVE MY SKIN. WELL, THAT'S ABOUT TO CHANGE.

I HAVE TO TURN MY LIFE AROUND, GEN. I HAVE TO ***PROVE*** TO THE SPIRITS THAT I'M NOT SUCH A ***WASTE-CASE.***

HOW?

BY LEARNING WHAT THE GUILDS ARE REALLY ALL ABOUT.

BY FINALLY MAKING AN ***EFFORT***...AND SHOWING SOME ***RESPECT***...

...STARTING WITH THE ***NOUVEAU GUILD.***

GEN...WILL YOU ***TEACH*** ME?

COME IN!

Oh! SORRY, BOSS.

FORGET IT. BRING HIM IN-- I'M ON A *TIGHT SCHEDULE* TODAY.

DETECTIVE MANION. I HOPE YOU REALIZE HOW MANY *FAVORS* I BURNED TO SPRING YOU FROM JAIL.

...*DUKE*...?

DUKE, YOU HAVE TO LET ME *EXPLAIN!*

THAT GIRL HAS MAGIC LIKE I'VE *NEVER* SEEN BEFORE!

SHE DIDN'T EVEN BOTHER WITH *INCANTATIONS* -- TORE UP YOUR *PIXIE-DUST LAB* WITHOUT BREAKING A SWEAT!

TSK, TSK, DETECTIVE.

I TRUSTED YOU TO *RECRUIT* GISELLE VILLARD FOR ME. I'LL LOSE HALF A MILLION DUCATS A YEAR WITH THAT LAB SHUT DOWN...

THE GIRL AS GOOD AS SPIT IN MY *FACE*.

IF I DON'T HIT BACK, PEOPLE WILL SAY DUKE ABADDON'S GONE *SOFT*.

LET ME *HELP*, DUKE. LET ME MAKE IT UP TO YOU!

SHUT UP, OR I'LL NAIL YOUR TONGUE TO THE ROOF OF YOUR MOUTH.

NOW, *NORMALLY* WHEN SOMEONE HURTS MY BUSINESS, I MAKE THEM *EAT* THEIR OWN FAMILY...

...BUT THIS IS THE *GUILD MASTER'S* SISTER, AND I'M NOT ABOUT TO HAVE OUR NEW HEAD OF STATE *WHACKED*.

SO TELL ME, DETECTIVE, CAN YOU THINK OF A NICE, LOW-KEY WAY TO MAKE GISELLE VILLARD *SUFFER?*

Uh...KILL HER *FRIENDS?* I KNOW WHERE TO *FIND* THEM.

GO ON...

THEIR NAMES ARE LORRAINE, GUY AND ANNETTE. THEY'RE IN THE CITY JAIL, AWAITING TRIAL FOR PIXIE-DUST TRAFFICKING.

YOU WANT I SHOULD SPRING *THEM...?*

NO, DETECTIVE. YOU'VE FAILED ME ONCE. THERE WILL BE *NO* SECOND CHANCE.

AH, GOOD...THEY *DID* GET YOUR SIDEARM OUT OF IMPOUND, AS I REQUESTED.

A *CASTIGATOR,* MODEL ONE-OH-ONE. AN *IRONIC* CHOICE FOR A PERSON LIKE *YOU,* DON'T YOU THINK?

THE *HARROW-POINTS* HOME IN ON THE TARGET'S *CONSCIENCE.*

CASTIGATOR

101

ANY PETTY LITTLE *GUILTS* YOU MIGHT HARBOR EXPLODE INTO CRIPPLING ANGUISH.

A NICE, NON-LETHAL WEAPON AGAINST AN *AVERAGE* MAN, BUT WHAT DO YOU SUPPOSE IT WOULD DO TO A MAN WITH *MORTAL SINS* IN HIS HEART?

I RATHER EXPECT YOU'LL FIND LIVING *UNBEARABLE.*

DUKE... PLEASE...

BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM

AM I REALLY SUCH AN EMBARRASSMENT THAT WE HAVE TO DO CLASS IN THE ATTIC?

VERY FUNNY. NOW LOOK, GISELLE. ***THIS*** IS WHAT I WANTED YOU TO SEE...

...A MAN WHO WAS NOTHING BUT ***TROUBLE.*** A MAN WHO ***LIVED*** FOR DESTRUCTION AND CONQUEST.

HE HAD A *"HEAD FULL OF SNAKES,"* TOO. BUT HE WAS ABLE TO GROW ***PAST*** THAT...AND HE'S BEEN MAKING UP FOR IT EVER SINCE.

BELIEVE IT OR NOT, THAT MAN IS ALAIN LeCAVALIER, ***BEFORE*** HE BECAME ***ETERNAL SPIRIT*** OF THE NOUVEAU GUILD.

NO WAY...! ***THAT*** GUY LOOKS LIKE ***FUN!*** THE NOUVEAU SPIRIT *I* KNOW IS DULLER THAN DITCHWATER!

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN THE NOUVEAU GUILD WAS THE AGGRESSIVE UPSTART, SEIZING LAND AND POWER FROM OLDER, MORE COMPLACENT GUILDS.

ONLY WHEN OUR POWER BASE WAS CONSOLIDATED COULD WE MOVE ON TO ***HIGHER*** PURSUITS.

AND NOW YOU GUYS SPEND YOUR TIME CONTEMPLATING FLOWERS AND SUNSETS AND--

NO, NO

...THAT'S A COMMON *MISCONCEPTION.*

YOU ALWAYS HEAR PEOPLE SAY THAT OUR PHILOSOPHY OF MAGIC IS DEVOTED TO ***BEAUTY*** IN ALL ITS FORMS. CLOSE...BUT NOT QUITE.

OTHERS THINK THAT WE DRAW OUR POWER FROM EVERYTHING THAT'S ***BRIGHT*** AND ***GOOD.***

STILL OTHERS SAY THAT OURS IS THE MAGIC OF ***CREATION*** ITSELF.

THEY'RE ALL CORRECT...AND YET THEY ALL MISS THE ***POINT.***

IN THE LANGUAGE OF THE ANCIENTS, *"NOUVEAU"* MEANT ***NEW.*** AND ***THAT*** IS WHAT WE REVERE: INNOVATION, NOVELTY, PROGRESS...

Devi-Dogs

WE CELEBRATE *CHANGE.*

SKRA

HAVEN'T YOU EVER WONDERED WHY OUR ***FASHIONS*** AND ***VEHICLES*** ARE DIFFERENT EVERY YEAR, WHILE FOLKS IN THE SHAMAN OR DJINN LANDS LIVE AND DRESS LIKE THEY DID A THOUSAND YEARS AGO?

NOW THAT YOU ***MENTION*** IT...

TAXI

SOME PEOPLE ***CRITICIZE*** OUR FAST LIVING. THEY POINT TO OUR FADS AND SAY THAT AS A CULTURE WE HAVE THE ***ATTENTION SPAN*** OF A TWO YEAR-OLD.

BUT GROWTH AND PROGRESS ARE WHERE WE FIND OUR ***STRENGTH.***

OKAY, I THINK I GET IT. THOUGH I'M NOT SURE HOW ALL OF THAT AFFECTS NOUVEAU ***SPELL-CASTING.***

MAYBE YOU CAN EXPLAIN WHILE I FEED THE SQUIT AND CONJURE US SOME BREAKFAST.

AND WHAT ABOUT ***TRADITION***...AND ***HISTORY?*** IF YOU'RE ALWAYS REACHING FOR WHAT'S ***NEW,*** COULDN'T YOU, Y'KNOW...LOSE YOUR ***ROOTS***...?

IT'S A DELICATE BALANCE, TO BE SURE, BUT I HAVE FAITH THAT ***CHANGE*** IS ***GOOD,*** GISELLE.

PEOPLE ***RESIST*** CHANGE ALL THE TIME, BUT THAT'S JUST FEAR OF THE ***UNKNOWN*** KEEP--

BLAM

CASTIGATOR 101

GEN--!

DAMN. I HAD HOPED *NOT* TO INVOLVE THE GUILD MASTER IN *OUR* BUSINESS, GISELLE VILLARD.

TAKE SOME COMFORT IN THE KNOWLEDGE THAT SHE WILL *RECOVER*. CASTIGATOR ROUNDS DO NO *PHYSICAL* DAMAGE...

"...BUT AT THE MOMENT...

"...SHE'S DEEP *WITHIN* HERSELF, ALONE WITH HER SECRET DEMONS."

WHO...

...IN THE FOUR MOONS...

...ARE YOU?!

I AM ***ABADDON,*** ARCHDUKE OF THE BRIMSTONE PLANE. I'M THE ***BOSS OF BOSSES*** IN NOUVEAU CITY'S *DEMIMONDE*, OR DON'T YOU EVER READ THE MORNING SCROLL?

YOU ALREADY KNOW ONE OF MY ASSOCIATES: DETECTIVE MANION? ***FORMER*** ASSOCIATE, I SHOULD SAY...

WHEN YOU DESTROYED THAT PIXIE-DUST LAB MANION WAS RUNNING, YOU SHUT DOWN ONE OF MY BEST ***PROFIT CENTERS.***

I CANNOT ALLOW THAT LOSS TO GO UNAVENGED.

I SHOULD ADVISE YOU, BY THE WAY...

...NOT TO GET TOO ***ROUGH*** WITH ME.

WHY?

BECAUSE YOUR *FRIENDS* DON'T WANT YOU TO *HURT* THEM.

ISN'T THAT RIGHT, LORRAINE?

GISELLE! HELP US!

PLEASE! DON T *LEAVE* US IN HERE!

WHY IS HE *DOING* THIS TO US?!

KZAK

YOU HAVE MY *WORD* THEY'LL BE RELEASED...IF YOU COOPERATE.

RRRIGHT. AND WHAT EXACTLY IS IT YOU WANT ME TO *DO?*

SIMPLE. PUT *THIS* TO YOUR HEAD AND PULL THE TRIGGER.

LIKE I SAID, THE EFFECTS ARE JUST *TEMPORARY*.

AND I'M SUPPOSED TO JUST *TRUST* A... *WHATEVER* YOU ARE... TO LET MY FRIENDS GO?

WHEN AN INFERNAL DUKE GIVES HIS *WORD*, IT IS A BINDING *CONTRACT*.

FAP

JUST AS I PROMISE YOU THEY'LL *DIE* IF YOU DON'T PLAY THE GAME MY WAY.

WHAT'S WRONG, GISELLE? *AFRAID* OF WHAT YOU MIGHT FIND INSIDE YOURSELF?

PERHAPS YOU *SHOULD* BE...

CASTIGATOR

BLAM

GISELLE!

GISELLE!

STUPID!

DRUNK!

GISELLE!

TRAMP!

YOU *WANTED* TO BE USED! SO *EASY* TO TOY WITH...

DISGRACE! I CAN'T *BELIEVE* YOU'RE MY SISTER! MOM AND DAD NEVER LOVED YOU AS MUCH AS *ME*...

THIEF! YOU *STOLE* THE GUILD SPIRITS -- EVERYTHING I EVER *WORKED* FOR!

"HE HAD A '*HEAD FULL OF SNAKES*,' TOO. BUT HE WAS ABLE TO GROW *PAST* THAT...AND HE'S BEEN MAKING UP FOR IT EVER SINCE."

HEY, PARTY-GIRL. THOSE MAY BE *YOUR* PHANTOMS, BUT THEY'RE NOT *MINE*...

...NOT ANY MORE.

Oh, THANK THE STARS! YOU'VE GOT TO GET ME OUT OF HERE, *NOW!*

YOU ACTUALLY THINK I'M HERE TO *SAVE* YOU?! =HH= *OF COURSE* YOU DO...

LET'S FACE IT, THE PARTY'S *OVER.*

I JUST CAME TO SAY *GOOD-BYE.*

I PROMISED I'D LET YOU SMALL-FRY GO. I NEVER SAID A WORD ABOUT ***RESTORING*** YOUR SIZE...

unnnh...

GISELLE! GISELLE, ***SNAP OUT OF IT!***

DON'T WASTE YOUR BREATH. SHE'S AS FAR GONE AS HER SISTER RIGHT NOW.

PITY TO WASTE SUCH A BEAUTIFUL CREATURE, BUT ***SOMEONE*** HAS TO KEEP THIS TOWN RUNNING RIGHT.

GUESS WHAT, DUKE...?

THIS TOWN DOESN'T *NEED* YOU ANYMORE!

STUPID, *STUPID* GIRL...

KRIK

SKRIK

THIS CHANGES *NOTHING!*

SHRAK

KRK

KLAK

I AM *DUKE ABADDON!*

KLAK

KLAK

KLAK

KLAK

I AM *ETERNAL.*

KRAKKKADAKKA

NO, DUKE...

...YOU'RE A *PARASITE.*

CRASH

Oh...I *NEVER* WANT TO FEEL LIKE *THAT* AGAIN...

WHO *WAS* THAT...?

SOMEONE WHO CAME HERE TO KILL AN AIMLESS, SHALLOW *GIRL*.

SHE DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE.

GEN, CAN YOU MAKE THEM *NORMAL*-SIZE AGAIN?

IS THAT YOUR *FRIENDS*--? I, uh...

...I *THINK* SO... BUT THEY'LL HAVE TO GO BACK TO JAIL.

I KNOW. I ONLY HOPE IT DOES THEM SOME GOOD.

*PERHAPS THERE **IS** STILL HOPE FOR YOU, GIRL...*

ALAIN...? DOES THIS MEAN WE'RE BACK ON SPEAKING TERMS?

*YES, GISELLE. **YOU** AND I ARE...*

*...BUT I'M AFRAID THE **OTHER** GUILD SPIRITS DON'T BELIEVE IN YOU.*

THAT'S OKAY. I STILL BELIEVE IN *THEM*.

SO...WHERE SHOULD I GO FOR MY *NEXT* LESSON?

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NOT *ANOTHER* ONE!

Oh, NO. LOOK WHO IT *IS*.

HE MUST HAVE TRIED TO CLIMB TO SAFETY.

ANCESTORS...!

NOTHING THAT STALKS THE TALL GRASS COULD DO SUCH DAMAGE...

...NOTHING BORN OF *NATURE*...

AND HAVE ANY OF YOU EVER SEEN *TRACKS* LIKE THESE?

BE WARY, KINSMEN. THE WIND IS SHIFTING, AND WHATEVER DID THIS MIGHT STILL BE *NEARBY*.

TOO TRUE.

MASTER ZAI!

THE BEAST THAT DID THIS WILL HUNT THE SAME TERRITORY UNTIL *ALL* PREY IS EXHAUSTED.

WE HEARD A CRY IN THE NIGHT, AND WHEN WE ARRIVED...

MOKELE. HE WAS A GOOD SHAMAN. A GOOD ***FRIEND.***

THE SKIES WILL WEEP ON THE DAY I TELL HIS WIVES WHAT BEFELL HIM.

I CAN'T STOP LOOKING AT HIS ***FACE.*** WHAT WAS THE LAST THING THOSE EYES ***SAW?***

HIS ***EXPRESSION*** TELLS US ALL WE NEED TO KNOW.

KINSMEN, HAVE ANY OF YOU EVER FACED A *CHIWANDA?*

NO...?

IT IS A ***PREDATOR*** THAT STALKS THE PLANE OF THE ANIMAL-SPIRITS. BUT SOMETIMES ONE CROSSES OVER TO OUR WORLD--

--OR IS ***SUMMONED*** BY BAD MEDICINE.

THE *CHIWANDA* HAS NO REAL SHAPE OF ITS OWN. IT FEEDS ON ***FEAR***. IT HAS A PECULIAR ***GIFT*** FOR INSTILLING THAT EMOTION IN THOSE WHO SEE IT.

HOW MANY HAS THIS *CHIWANDA* CLAIMED FROM YOUR *KRAAL?*

SEVEN SO FAR, MASTER.

YES. I FEAR THERE WILL BE ***MORE*** IF...

...IF WE DO NOT...

MASTER?

STAND READY!

WHAT IS IT, MASTER ZAI?

...SOMETHING OUT THERE...

SORRY. I DIDN'T WANNA INTERRUPT...

IT'S ***HERE!*** GET BEHIND ME!

HEL-LO! DON'T YOU PEOPLE EVER GET VISITORS?!

LET'S SEE HOW IT FARES AGAINST ***STEEL,*** MASTER!

HOLD!

THE *CHIWANDA* MAY BE A MAGICAL BEAST, BUT ONE THING IT COULD ***NEVER*** DO IS UTTER A ***TRUE SPELL.***

IT APPEARS AS THOUGH WE HAVE A VISIT FROM THE REAL THING. WHAT DO YOU ***WANT*** FROM THE LAND OF THE SHAMAN GUILD, GISELLE VILLARD?

AND HOW IS IT THAT ***YOU*** SPOKE SUCH A SPELL? YOUR SISTER SAID THAT YOU NEVER REALLY TROUBLED YOURSELF TO ***LEARN*** MUCH MAGIC.

BELIEVE IT OR NOT, I'VE BEEN ***PRACTICING.***

A FEW ***THINGS*** HAVE HAPPENED TO ME SINCE THE LAST TIME I SAW YOU. THEY MADE ME ***REALIZE*** SOMETHING IMPORTANT.

SEE, I'VE BEEN USING THIS THING TO CAST EVERY SPELL IMAGINABLE WITHOUT EVER ***BOTHERING*** TO LEARN WHAT MAGIC REALLY ***IS.***

THAT JUST SEEMS... ***DISRESPECTFUL,*** DON'T YOU THINK?

LIKE EATING THE HARVEST WITHOUT PLANTING THE SEED.

WELL, I DON'T WANT TO BE LIKE THAT.

I'VE BEEN STUDYING NOUVEAU GUILD MAGIC, AND I'M HOPING YOU'LL TEACH ME THE ***SHAMAN*** WAY...

THEN YOU'VE WASTED YOUR JOURNEY. I HAVE ***NOTHING*** TO TEACH YOU.

DO YOU MEAN YOU *CAN'T* TEACH ME...OR YOU *WON'T?*

I HAVE *THREE* VERY GOOD REASONS NOT TO WASTE TIME ON YOU, GIRL.

THE *FIRST* IS THAT I'M BUSY PROTECTING MY PEOPLE RIGHT NOW.

THE *CHIWANDA* IS A VERY REAL THREAT, AND I MUST PLACE THEIR SAFETY ABOVE SATISFYING YOUR CURIOSITY.

THE *SECOND* IS THAT I DO NOT EXACTLY REGARD YOU AS A FRIEND. RECALL, WHEN LAST WE MET, YOU WERE BEATING THE *LIFE* OUT OF ME.

I WAS TRYING TO *SAVE* YOU! YOU GOT *TURNED* INTO ONE OF ANIMORA'S PET MONSTERS, IN CASE IT SLIPPED YOUR MIND!

EXACTLY! AND DID YOU EVER THINK TO *CHECK UP* ON ME AFTER THAT BATTLE?

THE SHAMAN LANDS WERE *VIOLATED* BY THE DEMON QUEEN'S RAMPAGE!

AND WHY DO I NOW LACK THE *MOJO* TO *REPAIR* SO MUCH OF THIS DAMAGE? WHY DOES MY CATHEDRAL STILL LIE IN RUINS, WHILE ALL MANNER OF SUPERNATURAL PESTS PROWL THE LAND?

BECAUSE *SOMEONE* RIPPED THE *ETERNAL SPIRIT* OF THE SHAMAN GUILD OUT OF ME! YOU *STOLE* MY CONNECTION TO THE *INFINITE--!*

NOT TO MENTION THE *OTHER* SIX GUILD SPIRITS! *THAT* CRIME, BY THE WAY, IS REASON NUMBER *THREE* FOR NOT HELPING YOU.

WHY BOTHER *ME,* ANYWAY? THE WISDOM OF MASTER MINDOKA DWELLS WITHIN *YOU* NOW.

WHY NOT LEARN FROM A FAR *GREATER* SHAMAN THAN I?

WELL, HE'S SORTA *NOT SPEAKING* TO ME THESE DAYS.

HA! JUST AS YOU *DESERVE!* YOU HAVE BEEN NOTHING BUT *TROUBLE* TO US GUILD MASTERS, GISELLE.

GO HOME AND LET ME DEAL WITH THE *CHIWANDA* FREE OF DISTRACTION.

SO YOU PLACE YOUR PEOPLE'S SAFETY ABOVE ALL, huh?

WHAT ABOUT PLACING IT ABOVE YOUR OWN *PRIDE?*

CAN'T YOU SEE *I'M* EXACTLY WHAT YOU *NEED* RIGHT NOW?

HOW SO?

YOU HAVE THE *KNOWLEDGE,* BUT NOT THE *RAW POWER* YOUR GUILD SPIRIT USED TO PROVIDE.

ALL I *HAVE* IS RAW POWER, AND ALL I'M ASKING FOR IS THE WISDOM TO *CONTROL* IT.

LET ME *HELP* YOU STOP THIS *CHIWAWA--*

CHIWANDA.

RIGHT. LET ME HELP, AND MAYBE I'LL *LEARN* A THING OR TWO THAT'LL KEEP ME FROM SCREWING UP EVEN WORSE. WHAT HARM COULD IT DO?

THERE HE IS.

GREETINGS, LeCAVALIER.

WE'VE MISSED YOUR COMPANY, ALAIN!

OH.

STILL FIXATED ON THAT HOPELESS GIRL? HOW DREARY.

COME, MINDOKA. THE NOUVEAU SPIRIT WILL REJOIN OUR FELLOWSHIP WHEN HE TIRES OF SEEING THAT GIRL **DISGRACE** HIS GUILD.

MINDOKA...?

HE'LL BE ALONG IN A **MINUTE**, HEROTUS.

KINSMEN, THIS IS ***GISELLE VILLARD,*** VISITING FROM THE ***NOUVEAU LANDS,*** WHERE HER SISTER IS GUILD MASTER!

SHE IS HERE TO HELP ***RID*** US OF THE *CHIWANDA* THAT HAS ALREADY TAKEN FAR TOO MANY OF YOUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS.

HI...

PREPARE THE VILLAGE SQUARE FOR THE *WAKULUWE!*

LET EVERY MAN, WOMAN AND CHILD IN THE *KRAAL* TAKE PART!

WE WILL SHOW HER THE STEPS TO THE DANCE, BUT GISELLE WILL BE THE TRUE SHAMAN TODAY.

I BEG YOUR ***PARDON?*** I'M NO SHAMAN! YOU HAVEN'T TAUGHT ME A SINGLE ***SPELL,*** MUCH LESS THE *WACKY-LULU* DANCE!

I SAID EARLIER THAT I HAD NOTHING TO TEACH YOU BECAUSE YOU ***ALREADY*** CARRY ALL THE ANSWERS WITHIN YOU. ***EVERYONE*** DOES.

JUST AS EVERYBODY MUST FIND THEIR ***OWN*** PATH TO THE CENTRAL MOUNTAIN.

WE BELIEVE THAT EACH INDIVIDUAL MUST BE THE SHAMAN OF HIS ***OWN*** LIFE.

"KEEP IN MIND WHAT A SHAMAN *IS*. A SHAMAN IS SOMEONE WHO HAS A ***DIRECT*** EXPERIENCE OF THE MYSTICAL REALM.

"NOUVEAU PRIESTS, ENCHANTRESS NUNS, TANTRIC ACOLYTES, DARK MAGI MONKS... THESE ARE ALL MERE ***FUNCTIONARIES*** OF THEIR BELIEF SYSTEMS...

"...THEY ***DESCRIBE*** MYSTIC TRUTHS THAT SLUMBER BENEATH THE WAKING WORLD, AND THEY ***SHOW*** YOU WAYS OF LIVING IN ACCORD WITH THE SUPERNATURAL...

"BUT THE SHAMAN IS NOT TOLD, NOR SHOWN THE WAY. THE SHAMAN HEARS THE CALL, AND GOES TO ***SEE*** THESE THINGS ***FOR HIMSELF.***

"OFTEN, THIS JOURNEY TAKES ***YEARS*** OF PREPARATION.

"BUT ***YOU*** HAVE A ***SHORTCUT*** TO POWER..."

"THE *WAKULUWE* CEREMONY IS MEDITATION IN MOTION.

"THE MOVEMENT AND RHYTHM STOP THE CHATTER IN YOUR HEAD, AND LET YOUR HEART LEAD THE WAY.

"SOMEWHERE JUST PAST ENDURANCE AND BEYOND YOUR COMPREHENSION, A DOOR OPENS TO THE NEXT WORLD...

"...YOU WILL ***KNOW*** IT WHEN YOU ***SEE*** IT."

MASTER ZAI...!

SOMETHING'S *HAPPENING*--! EVERYTHING'S CHANGING...

YOUR EARTHLY CONSTRAINTS ARE SLIPPING AWAY, GISELLE VILLARD! YOU ARE *CROSSING OVER!*

SEVEN SPIRITS, IT *WORKED!* HOW DID YOU KNOW IT WOULD...

...WOULD...

⇒AH⇐

=OOF=

WHAT HAPPENED?

YOU MUST HAVE BROUGHT SOMETHING ***WITH YOU*** THAT FORCED YOU BACK.

SOMETHING ***UNRESOLVED.***

Um...HOLD THAT THOUGHT.

FIRST, WHERE ***IS*** EVERYBODY?

ONCE YOU BEGAN TO CROSS OVER, THEY ALL ***TOOK COVER,*** ACCORDING TO PLAN.

=SIGH= ***WHAT*** PLAN?

YOU DIDN'T THINK THE *WAKULUWE* WAS SOLELY FOR YOUR BENEFIT, DID YOU?

IT WAS A ***TRAP*** FOR THE *CHIWANDA* -- AND ***YOU*** ARE THE ***BAIT.***

THE BEAST COULD NOT HELP BUT BE ***DRAWN*** TO THE MYSTIC ENERGY THAT BURNS WITHIN YOU!

I'M THE BAIT?! AND IT DIDN'T OCCUR TO YOU TO ***MENTION*** THIS?!

YOU WOULD HAVE BEEN TOO DISTRACTED TO MAKE ANY PROGRESS AT ALL.

NOW, GIRD YOURSELF! IT IS ***HERE!***

RRRAAARRRKK

THOUGHT YOU SAID THIS THING WAS *FORMLESS.*

IT *IS!*

THEN WHY =*UNGH*= DOES IT LOOK LIKE A *SERIOUSLY* MESSED-UP GIANT *BIRD?*

IT *DOES NOT!* IT APPEARS TO EACH PERSON AS HIS OWN *DARKEST FEAR!*

FLINT

SO WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO YOU?

YOU!

RARK

NO WONDER YOU ATTACKED THE MOMENT YOU SAW ME!

SEVEN SPIRITS, AM I *THAT* BIG A THREAT TO YOU?

IT...IS NOT *YOU*. IT IS WHAT YOU *REPRESENT*...

...SUCH POWER ENTRUSTED TO ONE SO UNREADY...

...LIKE THE CHILD WHO DROVE THE SUN-GOD'S OX CART *TOO LOW* ACROSS THE SKY.

WE'VE GOT A MYTH LIKE THAT IN NOUVEAU, TOO...

LOOK, I CAME ASKING FOR YOUR HELP SO THAT I *WOULDN'T* SCORCH THE WORLD!

SO HERE'S YOUR CHANCE TO *CHANGE* HOW THE STORY TURNS OUT!

RA-ARK

COME ON, ZAI -- *TEACH* ME!

VERY WELL...WHAT *KIND* OF BIRD DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

TALLER THAN A MAN! BIG *HEAD,* STRONG *BEAK,* PURPLE FACE, WITH GREENISH BROWN FEATHERS --

WHOA!

PURPLE FACE? THAT IS THE *KUNGU* BIRD!

SO *THAT* IS WHAT HELD YOU BACK FROM THE ANIMAL-SPIRIT PLANE!

⇒*UNH*⇐ HOW ABOUT WE ⇒*URN*⇐ ***KILL*** THIS MONSTER ***BEFORE*** WE ⇒*UNGH*⇐ GET BACK TO MY PERSONAL PROBLEMS?!

THAT'S JUST IT: WE *CANNOT* KILL IT!

YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE WITH SUFFICIENT POWER TO SEND IT ***BACK*** TO ITS OWN PLANE!

LISTEN! IN THE BUSH, THE *KUNGU* LAYS ITS EGGS IN THE NESTS OF ***OTHER*** BIRDS, WHO ACCEPT AND REAR THE *KUNGU* CHICK.

BUT THE *KUNGU* CHICK DENIES THE OTHERS THEIR FOOD. ONE BY ONE, IT ***KICKS*** ITS SISTERS OUT OF THEIR OWN NEST!

CAN YOU SEE THE ***CONNECTION...?***

WHAT ARE YOU--NO... ***NO WAY!*** NOT ***ME!***

I HAVE ***NOT*** DENIED MY SISTER A THING!

YOU THINK I EVER ***WANTED*** THIS POWER? I NEVER ***ASKED*** FOR ***ANY*** OF THIS!

"SOME ***WEIRDO*** AT GEN'S RITE OF ASCENSION SLIPPED ME THE ***SIGIL*** WITH A HANDSHAKE! IT WAS ***FORCED*** ON ME, UNDERSTAND?

"SO WERE THE ***GUILD SPIRITS*** FOR THAT MATTER!"

BARK?

I NEVER MEANT TO TAKE *ANYTHING* THAT WASN'T MINE --

--ANY MORE THAN *GEN* MEANT TO TAKE MY *BOYFRIEND!* SOMETIMES, THESE THINGS JUST *HAPPEN*...

...SOMETIMES YOU JUST GET DEALT A LOUSY *HAND,* BUT THOSE ARE THE CARDS YOU *HAVE* TO PLAY!

SO YOU CAN *TAKE* WHATEVER GUILT I HAVE LEFT FOR MESSING WITH GEN'S LIFE AND *CHOKE* ON IT, STUPID BIRD!

MY SISTER *LOVES* ME, AND I *AM* GOING TO DO *RIGHT* BY HER!

Oh.

SO MUCH FOR THE MIGHTY *KUNGU*, huh?

THERE IS SOMETHING... ***UNNATURAL*** ABOUT YOU.

I CANNOT DECIDE IF IT IS SIMPLY THE ***SIGIL***, OR SOMETHING ABOUT ***YOU*** IN PARTICULAR THAT MAKES YOU SO ADEPT...

...BUT I AM GRATEFUL THAT YOU ***ARE*** SUCH A QUICK STUDY. I COULD NEVER HAVE EXORCISED THAT *CHIWANDA* BY MYSELF.

Er, YOU'RE WELCOME. I THINK.

YES. THANKS ARE IN ORDER. AS ARE ***CONGRATULATIONS.***

I DID NOT **WANT** TO BELIEVE IT WHEN MY NOUVEAU BROTHER TOLD ME YOU HAD CHANGED, BUT YOUR **ACTIONS** ARE VERY PERSUASIVE.

PLEASE, ZAI. STAND AND FACE ME AS AN **EQUAL.**

MASTER MINDOKA!

I THOUGHT I WOULD ***NEVER*** HEAR YOUR VOICE AGAIN!

YOUR PRESENCE HERE, ON A SPIRIT PLANE, WITH **HER,** MAKES OUR MEETING POSSIBLE.

WE MUST NOT DENY HER ANYMORE, UNDERSTAND? THE TIME HAS COME TO WORK **WITH** GISELLE VILLARD.

THANK YOU. I HOPE THIS MEANS YOU'LL TEACH ME MORE ABOUT YOUR WAYS.

OF COURSE. THOUGH I EXPECT THE **LEARNING** WILL BE MUTUAL.

AS LONG AS WE ARE ALL TOGETHER, PERHAPS WE CAN ARRANGE FOR THE **RESTORATION** OF THE SHAMAN CATHEDRAL...?

KRUM
SORRY I DIDN'T THINK TO DO THIS *WEEKS* AGO...
NICELY DONE.
TELL ME, GISELLE. HAVE YOU DECIDED ON THE **NEXT** GUILD TO WIN OVER?
ALLOW ME TO MAKE A **SUGGESTION**...

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"BACK WHEN I WAS NINETEEN YEARS OLD, I MET A GUY NAMED ***PATRIC***. HE WAS THE FIRST ***MAGICIAN***--ASIDE FROM MY SISTER--WHO I'D ALLOWED AROUND ME SINCE...

"...WELL, SINCE JUST AFTER THE ***ACCIDENT*** WITH MY PARENTS...

"PATRIC WAS ONE OF THOSE GUYS WHO DIDN'T WANT TO MASTER ONE SCHOOL OF SORCERY--HE WANTED TO MASTER ***ALL*** OF THEM.

"SO I SAT THROUGH ONE BORING PRACTICE SESSION AFTER ANOTHER BECAUSE I THOUGHT I WAS IN LOVE.

"WHEN HE ARRANGED A YEAR-LONG WORK-STUDY ASSIGNMENT IN THE ***DJINN LANDS,*** I TOLD PATRIC I'D WAIT FOR HIM TO COME BACK.

"AFTER THREE MONTHS, THE LETTERS STOPPED COMING. I WORRIED THAT SOMETHING BAD HAD HAPPENED TO HIM AND WENT TO FIND HIM MYSELF.

"AND THAT'S WHEN I LEARNED THAT NOT EVERY DISAPPEARING ACT IS DONE BY MAGIC. SOMETIMES ALL IT TAKES IS ***SMOKE*** AND ***MIRRORS***..."

AND THE *MORAL* OF THE STORY IS--

NO, NO. DON'T OVER-EXPLAIN IT. THE WHOLE POINT IS FOR THE LISTENER TO ARRIVE AT THE MEANING FOR HIMSELF.

OKAY. SO...? WHAT'D YOU THINK?

WELL, IT *DOES* TELL ME MORE ABOUT YOU, BUT IT IS NOT QUITE WHAT I MEANT WHEN I ASKED YOU TO *TELL ME A STORY.*

C'MON, CUT ME A LITTLE SLACK. I MEAN, I CAME HERE HOPING YOU'D ***TEACH*** ME SOMETHING ABOUT THE DJINN GUILD.

I THOUGHT I'D BE DOING MORE ***LISTENING*** THAN TALKING.

THEN YOUR ***FIRST*** LESSON ABOUT US IS THAT WE KNOW THE VALUE OF A GOOD STORY:

WE HAVE A FAMOUS LEGEND ABOUT A GIRL NAMED ***JINAI,*** WHO WAS CAGED BY THE PRINCE OF THE NETHER PLANES. PERHAPS YOU'VE HEARD IT?

SHE WAS ***FORCED*** TO TELL HIM ONE STORY AFTER ANOTHER-- THE MOMENT SHE BEGAN TO BORE HIM, SHE WOULD SURELY BE PUT TO DEATH.

WAIT A MINUTE...I THINK I SAW THIS ON THE ***LATE SHOW*** ONCE.

DOESN'T SHE CONVINCE HIM TO ***FREE*** HER BY THE END, OR SOMETHING?

I HAVE NO IDEA HOW THE NOUVEAU ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY HAS CORRUPTED THE *SONGS OF JINAI.*

WHAT I DO KNOW IS THAT THE WISDOM, VALUES AND ***SPIRIT*** OF A PEOPLE ARE FOUND IN THEIR ***LORE.*** TELL ME A TALE, AND YOU REVEAL WHO YOU ***ARE.***

LISTEN NOW, GISELLE VILLARD. ***I*** WILL TELL YOU OF THE ***BOOK OF CREATION,*** AND YOU WILL BETTER UNDERSTAND WHO ***WE*** ARE...

"IN THE BEGINNING, THE GREAT MOTHER WHO MADE THE UNIVERSE AND WHO CREATED CIRESS ALSO BEGAT THREE DIFFERENT KINDS OF SENTIENT BEINGS.

"SHE CREATED THE ***ANGELS*** FROM LIGHT ITSELF. SHE MADE THE ***HUMANS*** OUT OF CLAY. AND SHE MADE THE ***DJINNS*** OUT OF SMOKELESS FIRE.

"THESE SAME THREE RACES OF SENTIENT BEINGS SHARED CIRESS FOR UNTOLD EONS.

"NOW, THE ANGELS HAVE WITHDRAWN ALMOST ENTIRELY FROM WORLDLY LIFE. BUT THE HUMANS AND THE DJINNS ARE BOTH STILL VIGOROUSLY ENGAGED WITH WORLDLY CONCERNS."

AND...?
AND WHAT?
THAT'S *IT?* THAT'S THE *STORY?*
WELL...
THAT'S NOT A STORY. THAT'S JUST THE ***SET-UP.*** THE ANGELS AND HUMANS AND DJINNS HAVE TO ***DO*** SOMETHING, DON'T THEY?
AND...AND WHAT THE HEX IS *"SMOKELESS FIRE"* ANYWAY?
IT'S... ***PURE*** FIRE... ***ESSENTIAL FLAME...***
DON'T GET MIRED IN ***DETAILS.*** THE ***HEART*** OF THE STORY IS THAT HUMANS ARE NOT THE CREATOR'S ***ONLY*** CHILDREN, NOR EVEN HER MOST FAVORED.
THE HUMAN RACE ***SHARES*** THIS WORLD WITH UNSEEN BEINGS THAT ARE AS WORTHY AS ANY PERSON.
TOO OFTEN, HUMANS SEE THEMSELVES AS THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE. IT'S ***HEALTHY*** TO REMEMBER THAT THEY ARE NOT.
SO ***IS*** THERE MORE TO THAT MYTH? WHAT HAPPENED WITH THE HUMANS AND THE DJINNS?
I SHALL TELL YOU. BUT FIRST, IT IS ***YOUR*** TURN TO TELL ME A STORY.
ANOTHER...? MAN, THIS IS SO ***NOT*** WHAT I EXPECTED.
I MEAN, THE SHAMAN MASTER WAS ALL ***MAD*** AT ME FOR NOT HELPING HIM REBUILD HIS LANDS AFTER ANIMORA'S LAST INVASION.
I FIGURED IT'D BE THE SAME WITH ***YOU.***
INSTEAD, THE PLACE LOOKS GREAT AND ALL YOU WANT IS TO FLIP THROUGH MY DIARY.
ARE YOU GOING TO CRITICIZE ME FOR ***NOT*** RESENTING YOU, OR ARE YOU GOING TO BE A GOOD GUEST AND TELL YOUR HOST A ***TALE?***
OKAY. SORRY...

"LET'S SEE...

"OKAY, WHEN OUR PARENTS PASSED AWAY, MY OLDER SISTER GEN AND I REACTED IN VERY DIFFERENT WAYS.

"SHE THREW HERSELF INTO HER STUDY OF NOUVEAU GUILD MAGIC. I THREW MYSELF INTO MY OWN STUDY...OF ***BOYS.***

"BUT GEN REFUSED TO ADMIT I WAS ***HOPELESS*** AT MAGIC. SHE KEPT TRYING TO TEACH ME--

"--AND, JUST AS DOGGEDLY, I'D ***FAIL,*** HOPING SHE'D FINALLY GIVE UP ON IT.

"AFTER A COUPLE OF YEARS, GEN HIRED A ***TUTOR*** FOR ME. SHE THOUGHT I WAS FAILING BECAUSE SHE LACKED TEACHING SKILLS.

"THAT'S GEN FOR YOU. IT NEVER OCCURRED TO HER THAT I DIDN'T ***WANT*** TO LEARN ALL THAT NOUVEAU JUNK. SO I DECIDED THAT MY TUTOR JUST MIGHT SERVE A PURPOSE AFTER ALL.

"FINALLY, SHE UNDERSTOOD. AFTER THAT, SHE LET ME BE ***ME*** AND I LET HER BE ***HER,*** AND WE ALL GOT ALONG MUCH BETTER."

Ah. SHE COULD NOT SEE THE TRUTH RIGHT IN FRONT OF HER, SO YOU FORCED HER ***BEYOND*** THE AMBITIONS SHE IMPOSED UPON YOU.

NOT BAD, GISELLE. YOU ARE A BETTER STORYTELLER THAN YOU LET ON.

Oh, PLEASE... YOU'RE TOO KIND...

WOW.

SAY, WHEN ***DID*** YOU GUYS REBUILD? LOOKS LIKE ANIMORA'S INVASION BARELY LEFT A SCRATCH, BUT I'D HEARD THE DJINN LANDS WERE ESPECIALLY ***HARD-HIT.***

YES...WELL, WE HAD OUR SHARE OF SUFFERING. BUT, AS I SAID, THE WORKS OF MAN ARE NOT THE ***ONLY*** POWER IN THIS LAND. OUR FRIENDS, THE ***DJINNS,*** TOOK PITY AND LENT US THEIR AID.

RIGHT. THE DJINNS. TELL ME ***MORE*** ABOUT THEM. IT SEEMED LIKE YOU WERE GOING SOMEWHERE WITH THAT.

YES. I'LL TAKE UP FROM JUST AFTER THE ***CREATION...***

"AS WITH HUMANS, DJINNS CAME IN ALL TYPES, BOTH GOOD AND BAD -- THE WORST OF WHICH WERE THE ***GHULS*** AND THE ***IFRITS***. BUT, BY AND LARGE, THERE WAS HARMONY BETWEEN MAN AND DJINN.

"THOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO, HUMAN AND DJINN HOLY MEN WORSHIPPED SIDE BY SIDE--

"--UNTIL THE IFRIT NAMED ***IBLIS*** CAME TO RULE OVER HIS KIND.

"THE CREATOR WAS OFFENDED THAT HER DIVINE JUDGMENT SHOULD EVEN BE QUESTIONED. SHE PUNISHED IBLIS FOR HIS HUBRIS BY DISOWNING ALL DJINNS."

"***PROUD*** IBLIS, WHO APPROACHED THE CREATOR AND DEMANDED TO KNOW WHY THE SONS OF ESSENTIAL FLAME SHOULD HAVE TO ***SHARE*** A WORLD WITH THOSE BORN OF CLAY.

"CUT OFF FROM THE POWER OF CREATION, THE DJINNS FELL ***ILL***. THEIR SMOKELESS FLAME GUTTERED IN THE COLD WIND OF THE CREATOR'S INDIFFERENCE.

"IBLIS ***REPENTED,*** BUT THE CREATOR WOULD NOT HEAR HIM, SO HE SWALLOWED HIS PRIDE AND ASKED THE ***HUMANS*** TO HELP ***RESTORE*** THE DJINNS IN THE CREATOR'S SIGHT.

"IT WAS THIS ***COLLABORATION*** OF MAN AND DJINN THAT LED TO THE ***INVENTION*** OF MAGIC.

"THEY FOUND THAT CIRESS WAS BLESSED WITH A WEALTH OF UNSEEN ***UNIVERSAL ENERGY,*** FOREVER DENIED TO THE DJINNS BY THE CREATOR'S CURSE...

"UNLESS A HUMAN MAGICIAN ***CHANNELED*** IT, ALTERING IT JUST ENOUGH SO THE DJINNS COULD DRINK OF IT AND RESTORE THEMSELVES.

"THE DJINNS WERE SAVED.

"IBLIS AND HIS KIND ***NEVER*** FORGOT THAT THE SONS OF CLAY WERE THE ***KEY*** TO THEIR SALVATION."

WAIT A MINUTE...SO YOU'RE TELLING ME THIS IS HOW MAGIC WAS *INVENTED?*

THERE WEREN'T *ANY* GUILDS BEFORE ALL THIS HAPPENED?!

THAT IS PRECISELY WHAT I AM SAYING.

Psst! Hey!

SKITTER--! DO YOU *MIND?*

But--

THE DJINN GUILD WAS THE *FIRST* MAGICAL GUILD IN HISTORY. ITS MAGIC WAS INVENTED, NOT TO BENEFIT HUMANS, BUT TO SAVE THE DJINNS.

Hey, kid...take five.

EVERY SUBSEQUENT SCHOOL OF MAGIC HAS *FURTHERED* THE PROCESS OF ENERGY CONVERSION THAT SUSTAINS THE DJINNS.

Pssst-- NOW, Giselle!

DID YOUR *SQUIT* JUST...?

SOMETIMES WHEN HE'S *GASSY,* IT ALMOST SOUNDS LIKE HE'S *TALKING.* 'SCUSE ME FOR A MOMENT...

YES, SKITTER, I ***KNOW***. I ALREADY KNOW, AND I'M ***HANDLING*** IT.

JUST HAVE A LITTLE ***FAITH*** IN ME, OKAY?

WHAT'S SO IMPORTANT THAT IT CAN'T WAIT?

Somethin' ***FUNNY*** going on here, kid. Haven't you ***NOTICED?*** Somethin'--

A...CONFERENCE WITH YOUR ***PET...?***

HEY, IT'S NOT ***THAT*** WEIRD--I HAVE FRIENDS WHO TALK TO THEIR ***CARS.***

YES...WELL...I BELIEVE IT IS ***YOUR*** TURN NOW TO SPIN ANOTHER TALE.

OKAY, LET'S SEE...

"RATHER THAN TELL YOU ABOUT YET ANOTHER OF *MY* BOYFRIENDS, I'LL MENTION ONE OF *GEN'S*.

"THAT'S RIGHT, SHE *DID* GO ON A DATE OR TWO BEFORE GETTING TOGETHER WITH THIERRY.

"GEN MET *LYEL* WHILE STUDYING AT THE NOUVEAU SEMINARY. SHE'D ALMOST NEVER LOOKED TWICE AT A BOY, BUT LYEL SEEMED *DIFFERENT* THAN THE REST.

"HE WAS SENSITIVE, HE WROTE POETRY, HE WAS UNBELIEVABLY NEAT AND IN PERFECT SHAPE...

"...AND HE EVEN MANAGED TO LOOK GOOD IN THOSE SILLY SKIRTS THE NOUVEAUS MAKE THEIR MEN WEAR!

"OF COURSE, I REALIZED PRETTY QUICKLY THAT IT WOULD *NEVER* WORK, BUT I HAD TO MAKE *GEN* UNDERSTAND. SO I GOT HER TO COME OUT WITH ME FOR A VERY RARE NIGHT ON THE TOWN...

"IT MIGHT SOUND CRUEL, BUT I *HAD* TO DO IT.

"NEITHER ONE OF THEM WOULD HAVE EVER ADMITTED THE *TRUTH* IF THEY HADN'T BEEN FORCED TO."

DON'T MISUNDERSTAND: I HAD NOTHING ***AGAINST*** LYEL. LATER ON, I EVEN FIXED HIM UP WITH MY FRIEND GUY.

BUT HE AND GEN HAD ONLY GOTTEN TOGETHER BECAUSE THEY WERE ***SAFE*** FOR EACH OTHER.

LYEL WASN'T READY TO GO PUBLIC, AND SHE WASN'T READY FOR ANYTHING BEYOND A PECK ON THE CHEEK -- WHICH IS AS FAR AS THEY PUSHED IT -- EVEN IF GEN DIDN'T KNOW ***WHY.***

IT WAS A ***FOOL'S PARADISE.***

WELL TOLD, GISELLE! I COULD SPEND ONE THOUSAND AND ONE EVENINGS LISTENING TO YOU.

YES, I'M SURE YOU ***COULD.***

BUT THE ***THEME*** OF YOUR TALES GROWS A BIT ***REPETITIVE.*** THEY'RE ***ALL*** ABOUT FALSE APPEARANCES AND HIDDEN TRUTHS FORCEFULLY REVEALED...

Oh, SO I FINALLY GOT ***THROUGH*** TO YOU? I WAS STARTING TO WONDER JUST HOW LONG IT WOULD TAKE BEFORE YOU'D FACE THE TRUTH AROUND ***HERE...***

...IBLIS...

GISELLE VILLARD, YOU ARE INDEED A ***REVELATION.***

MASTER ATYAAH THOUGHT YOU NAUGHT BUT A SHALLOW GIRL. I CAN SEE THAT YOUR ***TRUE*** DEPTHS HAVE YET TO BE MEASURED.

'TIS A SHAME WE COULD NOT TRADE TALES FOR A WHILE LONGER.

IT IS MY FAVORITE PASTIME, AND IN YOUR OWN WAY YOUR SKILLS RIVALED THOSE OF JINAI HERSELF.

I WAS IN NO GREAT HURRY TO ***DESTROY*** YOU, LITTLE MYSTIC.

YIKES!

SEVEN SPIRITS...I KNEW IT WOULD BE BAD, BUT I'D HOPED FOR BETTER THAN *THIS!*

YES. THE DEMON QUEEN'S ONSLAUGHT WAS CRUEL INDEED...

"WHEN SHE FIRST RAISED HER ARMY OF ***MAGICAL BEASTS*** AND SET THEM TRAMPLING ACROSS THE GLOBE, I FELT THE SURGE OF ENERGY ROLL IN LIKE THE SPRING FLOODS.

"AND I RECOGNIZED THIS INVASION AS THE ***OPPORTUNITY*** FOR WHICH I HAD WAITED TEN THOUSAND LIFETIMES.

"I ***LET*** THE MONSTERS DEMOLISH THE PALTRY WORKS OF MAN BEFORE MARSHALLING THE DJINN FORCES AGAINST THEM...

"...FOR THOUGH THE MAGICAL BEASTS WERE A THREAT TO HUMANS, THEY WERE A ***FEAST*** TO THE DJINN!

"AFTER CENTURIES OF HUMILIATING ***DEPENDENCY*** ON THE SONS OF ***MUD,*** THE CHILDREN OF FLAME REIGNED ONCE AGAIN SUPREME--

"--FLUSH WITH THE STOLEN ENERGIES OF A DARK GODDESS WHO WOULD NOT SURVIVE TO RECLAIM THEM."

AND NOW YOU *THREATEN* MY NEW ORDER. IT IS WITH *REGRET* THAT I MUST--

WHUNG

THAT... WASN'T *MAGIC*...

NO, IT *WASN'T.*

IT'S SOMETHING CALLED *THE SIGIL*...

...AND IN ADDITION TO WORKING MAGIC, IT CAN CHANNEL THE RAW UNIVERSAL ENERGIES DIRECTLY--

--ENERGIES THAT ARE STILL OFF-LIMITS TO *YOU*.

SO PLEASE DON'T MAKE ME DO THAT AGAIN, BECAUSE I REALLY DON'T WANT TO FIGHT YOU.

WHAT *DO* YOU WANT...?

DUHH...WHAT HAVE I BEEN TELLING YOU ALL DAY?! I WANT YOU TO STOP LIVING A ***LIE!***

YOU'RE THE INVENTOR OF MAGIC, YOU'VE TALKED TO GOD HERSELF, AND YET YOU'D BE HAPPY TO LIVE IN AN ***ILLUSION*** 'TIL THE ***JUICE*** YOU STOLE FROM OL' SCALE-FACE RUNS DRY? ***GET REAL!***

THIS IS A CHANCE TO SHOW EVERYONE THAT YOU'RE ***NOT*** THE CONCEITED, SELF-CENTERED MONSTER THEY PAINT YOU AS IN THEIR MYTHS!

DO THE RIGHT THING AND THESE PEOPLE WILL NEVER FORGET WHO GAVE THEM BACK THEIR LIVES! AND NEITHER WOULD *"THE WOMAN UPSTAIRS."*

YOU COULD ***START*** BY RELEASING MASTER ATYAAH...

I EXPECT NOT EVEN THIS *RESTORATION* WILL ERASE YOUR PEOPLE'S FEAR OF ME.

SOMETIMES FEAR IS A *GOOD* THING. IT KEEPS *COMPLACENCY* AT BAY.

WISELY PUT, GUILD MASTER. *FAREWELL!*

GISELLE VILLARD, HOW CAN WE EVER THANK YOU?

EASY. JUST TAKE A LITTLE WALK WITH ME--

--TO THE *SPIRIT PLANE*...

THERE'S SOMEONE HERE I'M SURE YOU'LL BE HAPPY TO ***SEE***...

I HOPE YOU GUYS ***CAUGHT*** ALL OF THAT.

YES, GISELLE. I CONVINCED THE DJINN SPIRIT TO WATCH AS SOON AS I REALIZED WHAT YOU WERE UP TO.

MASTER JINAI! I HAD LOST ALL HOPE OF ***EVER*** SEEING YOU AGAIN!

*MARK YOUR WORDS, ATYAAH. IF THIS GIRL CAN OUTWIT THE KING OF DJINNS, THEN PERHAPS **ALL** THINGS ARE POSSIBLE.*

"JINAI," huh? ARE YOU...?

*THE VERY SAME. THOUGH, WHAT TOOK ME **ONE THOUSAND AND ONE** TALES TO ACCOMPLISH, YOU ACHIEVED WITH **THREE**.*

Blame it on modern entertainment. People's attention spans just ain't what they usedta be...

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AS YOU CAN SEE, THERE'S NOTHING IN MY HAT. CORRECT?

SURE. BUT IF YOU PULL A RASPLIT OUT OF THAT THING I AM GONNA BE *SO* DISAPPOINTED.

JUST HANG ON. THIS GETS *GOOD*...

Uh-oh... WHERE DID IT GO...?

Whoaaaaa

PIET--!

SHWFFFFFF

FWOOOOM

YAAAAAHH!

AAIIIEEE!

FRIVOLOUS FRITTERS, PIET! THAT WAS *GREAT!*

THANKS, JASPER. I CAN'T WAIT TO TRY IT OUT ON MASTER MONDRU...

EXCUSE ME, BUT... THAT DIDN'T MAKE ANY *SENSE.*

WELL, *OF COURSE* IT DIDN'T. THAT'S THE WHOLE *POINT.*

YOU MUST BE *NEW* TO THE ASTRAL LANDS.

YOU SEE, AROUND HERE WE STRIVE FOR THE *ABSURD* IN OUR --

NO. IT DOESN'T *ADD UP.* HOW COULD THAT *HAT* ACCOMODATE YOUR WHOLE *ARM,* MUCH LESS THE ENTIRE WORLD?

AND WHY DID IT SPIT YOU BACK OUT IF THERE WAS NO ONE LEFT TO *COMMAND* IT?

Y'KNOW, IF YOU *SPELL OUT* A JOKE IT STOPS BEING *FUNNY,* SO JUST LET ME SHOW YOU THE TRICK AGAIN...

eh. SORRY, NO.

THAT DOESN'T WORK FOR ME.

CHK

YOU'RE ON *HIATUS,* FELLAS. MAYBE I LL FIGURE OUT A WAY TO RET-CON YOU LATER, BUT RIGHT NOW YOU'RE JUST *NOT* FITTING IN.

WH--?

NFF!

...C'NT... MVV...

...WH... H'PPND...?

CHK

YUP. LOTTA WORK TO DO HERE. GONNA DEFINITELY HAVE TO *REORGANIZE...*

I GOTTA HAND IT TO YA, MAJORDOMO, ASTRAL CITY LOOKS TOTALLY *GREAT!*

DID YOU REALLY *REBUILD* AFTER THE WAR WITH ANIMORA, OR IS IT JUST AN *ILLUSION?*

Oh, it's **real,** all right. See, things are a bit more... **fluid** in this realm than on the rest of Ciress, so they're harder to permanently damage.

YOUR SQUIT SPEAKS *TRUE,* GISELLE VILLARD.

SKITTER...? I THOUGHT YOU DIDN'T LIKE TO LET STRANGERS *KNOW* YOU COULD TALK?

Just the ones it freaks out. Around **here,** a talking squit won't even raise an **eyebrow.**

SHOULD IT?

GISELLE VILLARD, I PRESENT YOU *MASTER MONDRU* OF THE *ASTRAL GUILD!*

Lemme know when you're **done,** kid. I'm gonna get Major here ta fix me a sandwich...

THANK YOU FOR RECEIVING ME, MASTER MONDRU. I TRUST MASTERS ZAI AND ATYAAH TOLD YOU ABOUT MY VISITS TO THEIR GUILDS...?

...

MASTER MONDRU...?

Aw, C'MON! YOU'RE THE *LAST* GUILD MASTER I EXPECTED TO GIVE ME THE *COLD SHOULDER!*

=GASP=

OUT HERE, GISELLE.

*YOU REQUESTED A TOUR OF MY LANDS? YOU WANTED TO LEARN OUR WAYS AND OUR VALUES? **THIS** IS THE BEST WAY TO FIND OUT.*

*THIS IS **ASTRAL PROJECTION.***

UMMM... I'M NOT SO KEEN ON LEAVING MY **BODY** BEHIND LIKE THIS...

THAT'S THE **LEAST** OF WHAT YOU NEED TO LEAVE BEHIND, GIRL! NOW, ARE YOU HERE TO **LEARN,** OR AREN'T YOU?

BECAUSE I LOVE A GOOD JEST, BUT I **DO NOT** KID AROUND WITH THE **CRAFT OF CALAMITOUS CONJURING!**

...SUSPECT WAS SEEN BREAKIN' AND ENTERIN' THE PREMISES BY THREE WITNESSES, NONE'A WHO SAID THEY--

WANTED

DEVEREAUX

"NONE OF WHOM."

?

OKAY... AND I'M ABOUT TA SLAP THE *SMUG* OUTTA *WHOM...?*

JEAN DUMONT, NOUVEAU NEWSBREAK. AND YOU ARE DETECTIVE ***DEVEREAUX,*** IF I'M NOT MISTAKEN...?

A ***REPORTER,*** huh? WHADDAYA ***WANT?***

NOT SO LONG AGO, YOU CAUGHT A CASE INVOLVING A CROOKED VICE DETECTIVE NAMED ***MANION***--WHO WAS THEN MISTAKENLY RELEASED. HE'S BEEN MISSING EVER SINCE.

I GOT ***NOTHIN'*** FOR YOU, PAL. YOU WANT MANION, I'D SUGGEST DRAGGIN' THE BAY.

ACTUALLY, I'M MORE INTERESTED IN A CERTAIN ***YOUNG LADY*** WHO WAS INVOLVED WITH THAT CASE.

HER FACE DON'T RING A BELL.

REAL-LY. IT *SHOULD.*

THAT'S ***GISELLE VILLARD,*** THE NOUVEAU MASTER'S ***SISTER.***

THE OFFICIAL LINE IS SHE COULDN'T CONJURE A COLD IF YOU GAVE HER A HAT AND A WAND...

...BUT I'VE INTERVIEWED TEN EYEWITNESSES WHO SWEAR ***SHE*** WAS THE ONE WHO DEFEATED ***ANIMORA,*** AND SOME WHO SAY SHE DISAPPEARED ***DUKE ABADDON.***

I ***KNOW*** YOU USED HER AS AN INFORMANT DURING THE MANION CASE. TELL ME, HOW DOES A GUILD ACADEMY DROPOUT WIELD THAT KIND OF JUICE?

YOU NEED TO GO NOW. SOON AS I FIND OUT *WHOM* YOUR ***SOURCE*** IS, I'LL MAKE YA BOTH WISH YOU'D ***NEVER MET.***

KRESH

SEVEN YEARS OF ***BAD LUCK,*** DETECTIVE...

NICE PLACE TO **VISIT**, BUT I DON'T THINK I COULD LIVE HERE. SOME OF THIS TRIPPY STUFF IS STARTING TO GIVE ME A **HEADACHE**.

THAT'S BECAUSE YOU CLING SO DESPERATELY TO THE **STRUCTURE** YOUR MIND IMPOSES **UPON** REALITY.

BUT ALL THOSE **ASSUMPTIONS** YOU CHERISH ABOUT THE WAY THINGS **ARE** WON'T HELP YOU HERE.

DON'T CONFUSE YOUR PRECONCEPTIONS WITH **TRUE** REALITY--AS MY OWN MASTER WAS FOND OF SAYING, "THE MAP IS NOT THE TERRITORY."

THE TEACHINGS OF THE ASTRAL GUILD **UNCLENCH** YOUR MIND...GET YOU **OUTSIDE** YOURSELF.

LITERALLY.

YES. IT'S THE BEST WAY TO OPEN UP THE MYRIAD POSSIBILITIES YOU MIGHT OTHERWISE IGNORE. AND YOU KNOW SOMETHING...?

LIFE IS JUST PLAIN **FUNNER** ONCE YOU EMBRACE THOSE POSSIBILITIES.

UM...I DON'T THINK "FUNNER" IS A REAL WORD.

=SIGH= SEE, THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT I'M **TALKING** ABOUT--!

DO YOU KNOW WHAT A "DEAD" LANGUAGE IS? IT'S WHERE ALL THE RULES OF GRAMMAR ARE SET IN STONE, WHERE THERE IS NO LONGER ANY **INNOVATION**.

THE LANGUAGE WE SPEAK IS ALIVE AND VITAL **BECAUSE** I SAY SOMETHING IS "FUNNER," OR YOU SAY SOMETHING'S "TRIPPY..."

...OR A MAN CALLS YOU "BABELICIOUS," AND YOU **UNDERSTAND!**

JUST AS YOU'VE LEFT YOUR BODY BEHIND, LEAVE THE **OLD RULES** BEHIND -- THEY'RE A **TRAP**. THEY'RE **SHACKLES**.

BE OPEN TO THE POSSIBILITY THAT A **BEGGAR** COULD BE **GOD** IN DISGUISE...

...OR A NURSERY RHYME COULD BE A **MASTER SPELL**...

OR A MIDDLE-AGED SORCERER WITH A FUNNY MUSTACHE COULD BE THE MOST **ATTRACTIVE** MAN I'VE EVER MET.

GOTCHA.

HA HA HA HA

HOOK, LINE AND SINKER...

WHEN YOU LET YOUR IMAGINATION RUN WILD...WHAT? WHAT'S **WRONG?**

LOOK.

NOTHING.

WHAT KIND OF MAGIC IS THIS?

NO MAGIC. JUST *ME.*

I *HATE* MAGIC, BY THE WAY. THE RULES ARE NEVER CONSISTENT. IT'S NOT FAIR TO THE AUDIENCE.

AUDIENCE...? WHAT ARE YOU *TALKING* ABOUT? WHO *ARE* YOU?

GISELLE...

GISELLE VILLARD.

Mm...NOT MUCH OF A PROTAGONIST, ARE YOU? YOUR ORIGIN WAS AN ACCIDENT...YOU DIDN'T EARN YOUR POWER...MOST OF YOUR VICTORIES ARE PRACTICALLY HANDED TO YOU...

...AT LEAST YOU'RE NOT IN THAT ONE-PIECE WITH THE CLEAVAGE ANYMORE...

Um...DO YOU SPEAK "GOOFBALL" ANY BETTER THAN ME, MONDRU?

GISELLE, WE SHOULD LEAVE RIGHT NOW. WE'RE A LITTLE VULNERABLE IN OUR ASTRAL FORMS.

MONDRU, MASTER OF THE ASTRAL GUILD. SO THAT'S WHAT THIS GHOST THING IS -- "*ASTRAL PROJECTION?*" THAT'S THE ***BEST*** HE COULD COME UP WITH?

enh. PRETTY TRITE.

MONDRU?!

CHK

OKAY, SOMEHOW, YOU'VE GOT THE **ASTRAL** GUILD'S NUMBER, BUT I'LL BET YOU'RE NOT SO HOT AGAINST A **DIFFERENT** BRAND OF MAGIC--

-- SAY, **NOUVEAU** GUILD... OR **DJINN** GUILD...

...OR **SHAMAN!**

enh.

PREDICTABLE, BUT AT LEAST IT'S IN CONTINUITY...

CHK

Whaddya **mean** there's no bluffing in Gork poker?!

What a stupid rule! Guess that's what ya **get** when you play with dumb animals...

Rowff?

Uh-oh. My girl's in trouble...

I'm taking Giselle's **bod** with me, Major. Wish us luck.

!

Villain, prepare to be des—

What the **heck?!** How'd **you** get the better of **them?!**

SO NOW IT'S ***FUNNY ANIMALS?*** Oh, NO...I DON'T THINK SO...

In about two seconds you won't think I'm so funny!

⇒Unf⇐

How are **you** still standing when reality itself was close to breaking?

SIMPLE: I DON'T BELIEVE IN ANY OF THIS... OR ***YOU.***

Oh, BUT I USED TO! I ***LOVED*** THIS PLACE, BACK WHEN IT PLAYED BY THE ***RULES,*** BACK WHEN IT WAS ***INTERNALLY CONSISTENT.***

BUT THEN THIS ***ANYTHING-GOES*** APPROACH GOT POPULAR, AND SUDDENLY YOU CAN'T TELL THE ***GOOD*** GUYS FROM THE ***BAD*** GUYS...

YOU DON'T KNOW IF YOU'VE WALKED IN AT THE ***BEGINNING*** OR THE ***END*** OF THE STORY...

I MEAN, WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ***STRUCTURE?*** TO ***CRAFT?*** NONE OF YOU EVEN CARE ABOUT SUCH THINGS ANYMORE.

WELL, I'M HERE TO PUT THINGS BACK IN ORDER -- TO ***SAVE*** YOU FROM YOURSELVES!

Kid, I'm leaving this up to **you**, understand? So use your **head!**

SKITTER? HOW'D YOU...

*OH, NEVER MIND -- IF YOU CAN GET ME BACK IN MY **BODY**, I THINK I KNOW WHAT TO **DO!***

YOU ALL THINK YOU'RE SO ***CUTTING EDGE,*** AND YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT ***PAGE*** YOU'RE ON!

WELL, THAT'S WHAT I'M HERE FOR: TO PUT YOU BACK IN YOUR PLACE!

CHK

Now!

HEY! HOW'D YOU DO THAT?

=UNH=

H-HOLD IT RIGHT THERE, OR... OR I'LL...

RELAX. I DON'T *BITE*, YOU KNOW. AT LEAST NOT SO IT *HURTS*.

WHY... ARE YOU LOOKING AT ME LIKE THAT?

SMART GUY LIKE YOU NEEDS TO *ASK*? SURELY YOU KNOW THAT *POWER* IS THE ULTIMATE APHRODISIAC...

...AND *YOU,* MISTER, ARE THE *MOST* POWERFUL THING I'VE EVER SEEN.

HOW *GULLIBLE...* ⇒ULP⇐..DO YOU THINK I AM..?

I KNOW, I KNOW...BUT TRY AND SEE IT FROM *MY* POINT OF VIEW:

STAY FROZEN IN PLACE, OR HAVE A FLING WITH THE MAN IN CHARGE.

IT'S NOT TOO TOUGH A *CHOICE,* IS IT?

ENH...

AH--!

FWOOSH

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?! *WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!*

YOU VE ***DOOMED*** YOURSELF, YOU KNOW! I WAS YOUR LAST

AH! YOU ***DID IT!***

WHAT IN THE FOUR MOONS ***WAS*** HE?

I'm not sure, but I sensed his **thoughts** before he left...

I think you sent him back where he came from -- a sad place where nothin' ever changes, and every fresh idea or event is just a rehash of what's already been done.

AND HOW DID YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO? OR GET HIM TO LET YOU IN CLOSE?

I JUST USED ***MY IMAGINATION*** AND GAMBLED THAT, EVEN IF THE PEN ***IS*** MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD, IT CAN'T HURT YOU IF THERE'S NOTHING TO ***WRITE ON.***

AND WHAT IF IT DIDN'T WORK?

THEN I IMAGINE SOMEONE *ELSE* WOULD'VE HAD TO BAIL US OUT. I'M JUST GLAD I GOT THE CHANCE TO PROVE I COULD DO IT *MYSELF.*

I knew ya **could.**

LOOK, I KNOW IT'S BEEN A *WHILE* SINCE YOU SPOKE WITH THE ETERNAL SPIRIT OF YOUR GUILD--AND I FEEL LOUSY ABOUT THAT SINCE SHE'S LOCKED UP INSIDE *ME.*

BUT I KNOW A WAY TO LET YOU TWO *TALK--*

THERE IS NO NEED FOR THAT, GISELLE VILLARD. IF, ONE DAY, YOU CAN **RETURN** HER TO MY SAFEKEEPING, THEN I WILL **GLADLY** ACCEPT THE SPIRIT OF MASTER ADAYA.

UNTIL THEN, I'D RATHER JUST CONCENTRATE ON **SURPASSING** HER.

OKAY... IF YOU'RE SURE SHE WON'T MIND GETTING *STOOD UP...*

ON THE CONTRARY, GISELLE, I **APPROVE.**

ASTRAL SPIRIT...IS THAT *YOU...?*

YES, GISELLE. WE'RE BACK ON SPEAKING TERMS. I HOPE YOU'LL STAY A WHILE WITH MONDRU AND LEARN SOME SPELLS WITH HIM.

YOU CONTINUE TO SURPRISE US, TO EXCEED OUR WILDEST IMAGININGS--

--AND THAT, AFTER ALL, IS WHAT THE ASTRAL GUILD IS ALL ABOUT.

DUMONT! GET YOUR SORRY BUTT IN HERE!

YEAH, BOSS?

THAT DETECTIVE YOU INTERVIEWED, WHAT WAS HIS NAME?

CLAUDE St. AUBIN EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

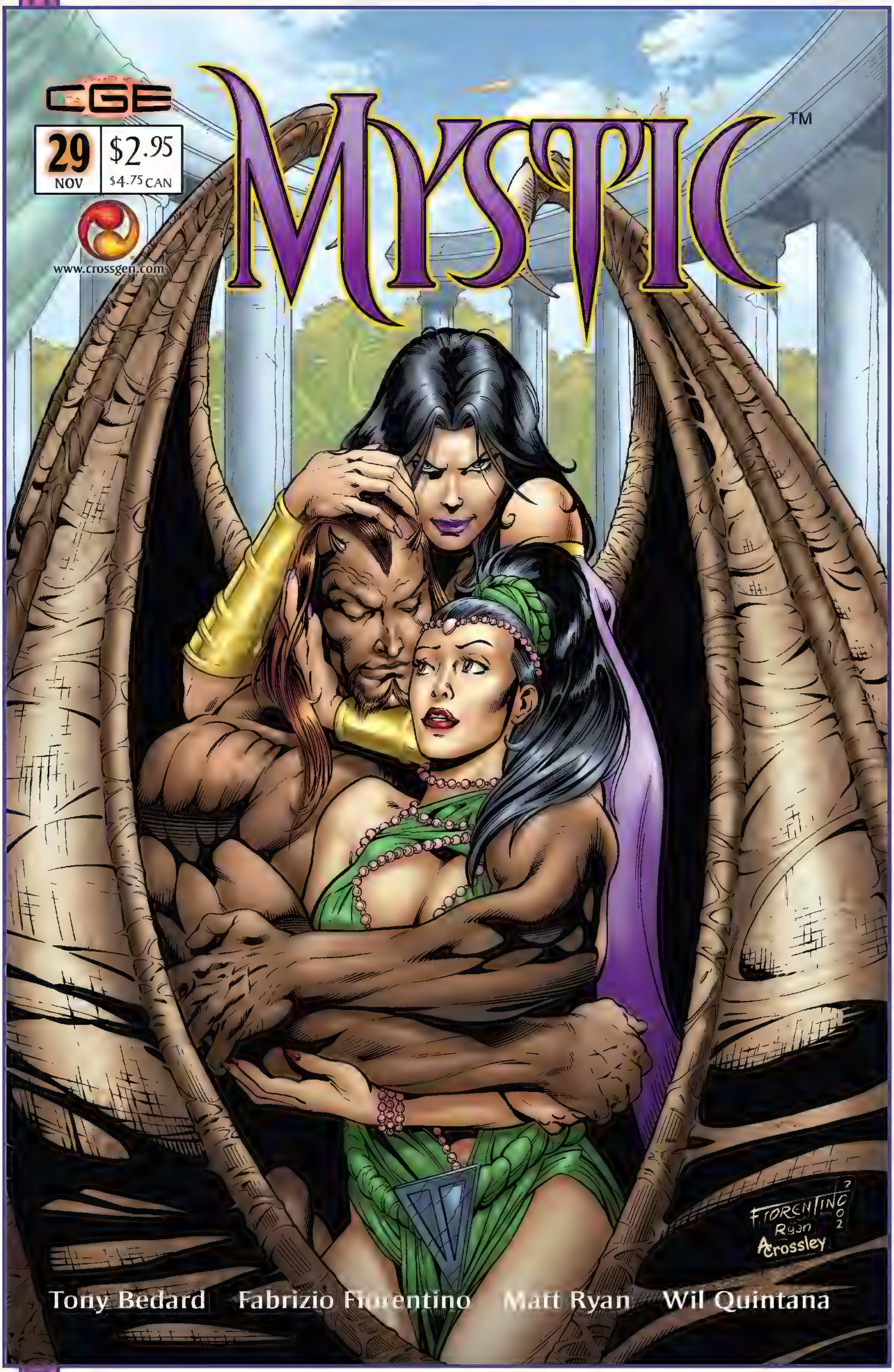
DETECTIVE DEVERAUX. HE DIDN'T ***COMPLAIN*** OR SOMETHING, DID HE?

RIGHT ABOUT NOW I WISH HE ***COULD...***

...NOUVEAU P.D. INTERNAL AFFAIRS DIVISION REPORTS THAT DEVERAUX WAS LAST SEEN EXITING THE PRECINCT HOUSE TO MEET WITH AN INFORMANT.

UNOFFICIALLY, THERE ARE SEVERAL THEORIES AS TO HIS FATE, BUT NO HARD EVIDENCE POINTING TO THE WHEREABOUTS OF THE MISSING DETECTIVE. THIS IS PIERRE LaCHANCE, NOUVEAU NEWSBREAK CRIME BEAT.

DUMONT, I DON'T THINK THIS WAS A COINCIDENCE. WHATEVER THIS BIG STORY IS THAT YOU'RE CHASING, YOU'D BETTER ***WATCH YOURSELF.***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GOTTA CONFESS: I'VE BEEN *PUTTING OFF* THIS VISIT.

SEE... THERE'S NO GETTING AROUND IT: WITH YOU GUYS, SOONER OR LATER IT'S GONNA COME DOWN TO *SEX*.

NOT THAT THAT WOULD'VE BOTHERED ME *BEFORE*. BUT LATELY I'VE BEEN TRYING TO CHANGE MY WAYS.

I'M, uh... *NOT* THAT KIND OF GIRL ANYMORE.

I KNOW, I KNOW...YOU PEOPLE DON'T SEE IT THE SAME WAY WE DO. YOU *DON'T* MAKE AS BIG A DEAL OUT OF IT...

...AND AT THE SAME TIME YOU TAKE IT *MORE* SERIOUSLY. FUNNY HOW THAT WORKS, huh?

LISTEN TO ME RUNNING ON AND ON. I REALLY THOUGHT I'D HANDLE THIS A LOT *BETTER* WHEN THE TIME CAME. SO, uh...

...ARE YOU REALLY GONNA JUST STAND THERE *STARING* AT ME THE WHOLE TIME I CHANGE INTO THAT THING...?

I WAS MERELY WAITING FOR YOU TO STOP TALKING, GISELLE VILLARD--

--SO AS TO INFORM YOU THAT THE *DRESSING ALCOVE* IS BACK BEHIND THAT THIRD PILLAR.

Um... I *KNEW* THAT...

Y'KNOW, YOU SHOULD HEAR THE THINGS PEOPLE *SAY* ABOUT YOU FOLKS BACK AT HOME...

NO NEED TO EXPLAIN, MISS VILLARD. WE ARE *WELL AWARE* OF THE TANTRIC GUILD'S REPUTATION: *HEDONISTS* AND *LIBERTINES* BESOTTED BY FLESHLY DELIGHTS.

WELL...*I* WOULD'VE PUT IT A LITTLE *NICER*.

MASTER VASHUA LOOKS FORWARD TO *CLARIFYING* YOUR MISCONCEPTIONS.

SKITTER, WHERE DO YOU THINK *YOU'RE* GOING...?

?

HEY, *MUSCLES!*

FIND HIM A *KENNEL*...OR AT LEAST A *SANDBOX*, WOULD YOU?

ulp--!

WE SHOULD HAVE ATTEMPTED IT THE MOMENT WE WERE **TRAPPED** HERE.

NOW, WE MUST CERTAINLY TRY IT BEFORE WE LOSE **ANOTHER** TO LECAVALIER'S INSIDIOUS CAMPAIGN.

Mmm... THERE IS DEFINITELY A NEW ELEMENT OF URGENCY, BUT THE **RISK**...

TRY **WHAT**, MAGUS?

THE MAGUS HAS A PLAN TO **ESCAPE** THE SPIRIT PLANE.

YES, ALAIN. EVEN **YOU** MUST TIRE OF BEING STUCK HERE LIKE A FLY IN A WEB--EVEN IF THE WEB IS THE MIND OF GISELLE VILLARD.

AND DON'T TRY TO TELL ME HOW **FAR** SHE HAS COME IN RECENT WEEKS...

I'M SURPRISED YOU EVEN KNOW OF GISELLE'S PROGRESS, CONSIDERING HOW LITTLE **INTEREST** YOU'VE SHOWN IN HER.

AND PRAY TELL, MAGUS, WHAT IS THE **PLAN** YOU PROPOSE?

THERE ARE **OTHER** ENTITIES THAT WALK THE SUBTLE PLANES, ALAIN LECAVALIER. I SAY WE STRIKE A BARGAIN WITH ONE--FEED IT THE GIRL'S **SOUL** IN EXCHANGE FOR OUR FREEDOM.

DOES YOUR CRUELTY KNOW NO BOUNDS?

AT LEAST I MAKE NO BONES ABOUT IT. YOU CLOUD OUR JUDGMENT ONE BY ONE.

YOU'VE **SEDUCED** THE SHAMAN, DJINN AND ASTRAL SPIRITS TO HER CAUSE.

I CAN SCARCELY BELIEVE THEY **FELL** FOR SUCH CLAPTRAP!

GISELLE WON THEIR APPROVAL FAIRLY, BY DINT OF HER **COURAGE** AND **CHARACTER**--TWO VIRTUES OF WHICH YOU KNOW NOTHING!

I KNOW A BACKSTABBING SNAKE WHEN I **SEE** ONE. ALL YOUR HONEYED WORDS WON'T OBSCURE YOUR BID TO **CONTROL** US!

ALAIN! **RESTRAIN YOURSELF!**

MAGUS, THIS IS NO WAY TO WIN **MY** SUPPORT!

BUT, **HEROTUS!** HE SULLIES SOMETHING **NOBLE!** WATCHING GISELLE FINALLY **GROW UP** IS ONE OF THE MOST GRATIFYING THINGS I'VE EVER SEEN.

JUDGE FOR YOURSELF WHO'S RIGHT-- SHE'S AT THE TANTRIC CATHEDRAL EVEN NOW, AWAITING AN AUDIENCE WITH **MASTER VASHUA!**

VERY WELL, I **SHALL**. BUT I'LL NOT HAVE **ANY** OF YOU TAINT MY OPINION ONE WAY OR THE OTHER. **LEAVE** ME, AND I SHALL TELL YOU IF SHE FAILS OR SUCCEEDS.

VASHUA IS THE MOST ACCOMPLISHED TANTRIC MASTER SINCE... WELL, SINCE **MYSELF**. SHE'LL SORT THIS GIRL OUT SOON ENOUGH...

WELL...? COME ON *OUT!*

BUT... BUT...oh, *ALL RIGHT...!*

YOU LOOK *SPLENDID,* GISELLE VILLARD! CLEARLY, YOU TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOUR BODY. WHY *HIDE* IT?

WELL, I'M NOT USUALLY THIS SELF-CONSCIOUS. SOME OF THE OUTFITS I USED TO GO CLUBBING IN MAKE THIS THING LOOK *PRUDISH.* IT'S JUST...

...BACK AT HOME, WHEN FOLKS CHECK YOU OUT, AT LEAST THEY PRETEND *NOT* TO. HERE, YOU GUYS *OGLE* SHAMELESSLY...! IT'S KINDA CREEPY...

WE DO NOT *"OGLE."* WE RECOGNIZE AND APPRECIATE BEAUTY OPENLY. WHAT WE FIND REPULSIVE IS *FALSE MODESTY.*

LEAVE US, EVERYONE. I WILL GRANT OUR GUEST THE KINDNESS OF A PRIVATE AUDIENCE...

...BUT YOU WILL HAVE TO LET GO OF YOUR INHIBITIONS, GISELLE, IF YOU SERIOUSLY EXPECT TO LEARN THE MAGIC OF *INTIMACY.*

Y'KNOW, IT'S NOT LIKE I'M TOTALLY INEXPERIENCED, WHEN IT COMES TO, YOU KNOW... *"INTIMACY."*

YOU SPEAK OF THE TAWDRY LIASONS OF YOUTH. I SPEAK OF SOMETHING FAR *BEYOND* A PHYSICAL COUPLING.

ALL YOUR PREVIOUS UNIONS WERE ABOUT ***YOU*** -- FULFILLING YOUR NEED TO BE LOVED AND DESIRED. YOUR BODY WAS THE ***CURRENCY*** YOU SPENT TO SATISFY THOSE NEEDS.

THAT'S KINDA PRESUMPTUOUS. ***TRUE,*** BUT PRESUMPTUOUS.

YOU MUST ***NEVER*** BARTER YOURSELF. THE BODY IS A ***TEMPLE,*** NOT A MARKET...

...JUST AS THE ***SENSES*** ARE THE CHARIOT OF EXPERIENCE, THE ***MIND*** THE VEHICLE, AND ***CONSCIOUSNESS*** THE SCREEN OF THE SOUL.

...Uh-*huh*. AND, uh...THAT ***MEANS...?***

⇒GASP⇐

WH... WHAT HAVE YOU *DONE*...?

SEVEN SPIRITS, I CAN *SEE* MYSELF... THROUGH *YOUR* EYES?!

AND I FEEL MY SKIN...THROUGH *YOUR* HAND!

DID...DID WE TRADE *BODIES* OR JUST *SENSES*...?

YES, YOU FEEL EVERYTHING THAT MY SENSES, MY BODY TAKES IN. JUST AS I FEEL ALL THAT *YOUR* BODY IS EXPERIENCING.

WE HAVE EXCHANGED *POINTS OF VIEW.*

AND THIS IS *SO* IMPORTANT, GISELLE: TO FULLY REALIZE ANOTHER'S VIEWPOINT, BE IT YOUR CLOSEST FRIEND OR YOUR WORST ENEMY.

AND... WHICH ONE AM I TO *YOU*...?

SEE YOURSELF THROUGH MY EYES AND YOU TELL ME.

Oh, WOW...I'M... I'M NOT SO *BAD,* AM I...?

YOU ARE *BEAUTIFUL,* GISELLE. I SENSE YOUR BEAUTY IS MORE THAN SKIN DEEP. REMEMBER THAT... *AND* THIS SPELL. IT IS THE ROOT OF ALL OUR BELIEFS.

WHOA...

I NEED A CIGARETTE.

NOT FUNNY. JUST REMEMBER THIS LESSON: *BECOME* THOSE YOU ENCOUNTER, AND YOU WILL ALWAYS KNOW THE BEST RESPONSE TO THEIR ACTIONS.

KNOW YOUR *FRIENDS.* KNOW YOUR *ENEMIES.* KNOW *YOURSELF.*

HEY, PROFESSOR! I KNOW YOU SAID TO *WAIT*, BUT...

NOUVEAU UNIVERSITY

WHAT ARE YOU *DOING* HERE?

LECTURE HALL 3 ADVANCED GUILD STUDIES

WE GOTTA *TALK!* IT'S ABOUT THAT MISSING *DETECTIVE*...

DETECTIVE DEVEREAUX IS NO LONGER ANY CONCERN OF YOURS...OR ANYONE *ELSE*.

YOU SHOULD NOT HAVE COME HERE, MISTER DUMONT. OUR ARRANGEMENT WAS *CLEAR:* WE CONTACT YOU, NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND.

YEAH, BUT...

LOOK, I APPRECIATE THE *HOT TIP.* THIS INFO YOU FED ME ABOUT THE GUILD MASTER'S SISTER LOOKS LIKE THE BIGGEST SCOOP SINCE THE NETHERGATE SCANDAL.

BUT COPS DON'T JUST GO MISSING. IF PEOPLE ARE *DYING* OVER THIS, I THINK I'M OUTTA MY DEPTH HERE.

YOU MAY INDEED BE IN OVER YOUR HEAD... BUT YOU ARE *IN,* NEVERTHELESS.

IT'S TOO LATE FOR COLD FEET, DUMONT. FINISH YOUR *EXPOSÉ*, REAP YOUR AWARDS, AND DEMAND A BIGGER SALARY.

BUT WHATEVER YOU DO, *DON'T* TRY TO BACK OUT NOW.

WE HAVE DISPATCHED AN *AGENT* TO UNDERMINE HER VISIT TO THE TANTRIC CATHEDRAL, BUT YOUR STORY WILL BE THE *COUP DE GRACE*...

PSSST! HEY, MUSCLES...?

MISS VILLARD?! BUT...I JUST SAW YOU TO YOUR BEDCHAMBER. YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO ***REMAIN*** THERE...

YOU HAVE TO ***HELP*** ME. NO ONE ELSE ***CAN.***

YOUR MASTER ***DID*** SOMETHING TO ME TODAY...SOMETHING THAT LEFT ME WITH THIS TERRIBLE ***ITCH...***

...AND IT'S IN A SPOT I JUST CAN'T SEEM TO ***SCRATCH...***

I'M... ***FLATTERED,*** BUT WHAT YOU FEEL IS COMMON IN FIRST-YEAR ACOLYTES. A SIMPLE EXERCISE WILL--

I DID NOT COME TO *EXERCISE,* YOU IDIOT...

...I CAME TO *FEED!*

MASTER ZAI, MASTER ATYAAH, MASTER MONDRU, ***AND*** YOUR SISTER ALL URGED ME TO ALLOW YOUR VISIT AND TUTOR YOU IN OUR WAYS, AND ***STILL*** I FELT MISGIVINGS.

NOW I KNOW ***WHY***...

THEY... THEY TOLD ME SOMEONE WAS ***MURDERED***...?

AS THOUGH YOU DO NOT ALREADY KNOW ***WHO*** THE VICTIM IS!

WASN'T HE...? Oh, NO...HE WAS ***MY***...

HE WAS ASSIGNED TO SEE TO YOUR EVERY NEED, AND ***LOOK*** WHAT HE GOT FOR HIS TROUBLE. DOES THAT ***MARK*** SEEM ***FAMILIAR?***

I WAS ***THERE*** WHEN YOU SUCKED THE LIFE OUT OF ANIMORA WITH THAT CURSED ***SIGIL*** ON YOUR PALM! ***WHY*** DID YOU DO IT TO MY ACOLYTE?!

I *DIDN'T* DO THIS!

EITHER THERE'S SOMEONE *ELSE* OUT THERE LIKE ME, WHICH I SERIOUSLY *DOUBT*...

...OR SOMEONE IS TRYING TO *FRAME* ME. SOMEONE WHO KNOWS *WAY* TOO MUCH ABOUT ME...

MY SECURITY GUARDS WILL DETERMINE THE TRUTH OF WHAT YOU SAY, BUT *YOU* WILL REMAIN IN CUSTODY.

I WILL NOT HAVE MY MAIN *SUSPECT* IMPEDING THE INVESTIGATION.

TRY AND *STOP* ME.

YOUR ACOLYTE WAS A NICE GUY--HE DIDN'T *DESERVE* THIS. ESPECIALLY NOT ON *MY* ACCOUNT!

THERE IS, OF COURSE, *ANOTHER* POSSIBILITY...

YES, I KNOW. EITHER WAY, OUR SANCTUM IS *VIOLATED*, AND I MUST FIRST IDENTIFY OUR *TRUE* ENEMY IF I AM TO KNOW HOW TO STRIKE BACK.

SPIRITS...? I HOPE YOU GUYS ARE WATCHING, BECAUSE THINGS ARE GETTING **UGLY** HERE.

CAN YOU PLEASE GET THE TANTRIC SPIRIT TO SPEAK TO ME... **PLEASE...?**

I AM HERE, GISELLE. I AM THE **ONLY** ONE CURRENTLY MONITORING YOUR PROGRESS.

AND I MUST TELL YOU HOW BITTERLY **DISAPPOINTED** I AM THAT ONE OF MY CHILDREN IS **DEAD** BECAUSE OF YOU.

WHAT?! I DIDN'T KILL HIM! YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT IF YOU'VE BEEN WATCHING!

YOU HAVE THE KNOWLEDGE TO FIND THE KILLER AND THE POWER TO DESTROY IT. WHY HAVE YOU NOT **DONE** SO?

OR HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN SO QUICKLY HOW TO **SEE** DISTURBANCES IN THE UNIVERSAL ENERGIES?

DID MASTER ATYAAH WASTE HIS TIME TEACHING YOU **DJINN SPELLS?**

YOU JUST **WATCH...**

ਸ਼ਕਤੀ

ਸੰਪੂਰਨ

ਸਮਰਪਣ

OKAY, WHO'S HERE TONIGHT...?

SOME GUARDS...

...ACOLYTES...

...MORE STAFF...

...AND SOMETHING *NOT HUMAN*...

WHAT IN THE INFERNAL PLANES ARE *YOU*?!

WAIT!

⇒OOF!⇐

HOLD ON...I'LL GET *HELP*...

GET *AWAY* FROM HER!

WAIT A MINUTE! *I'M* NOT THE ONE WHO DID THIS--IT WAS SOME KIND OF ***INFERNAL MINION.***

IT HAD BIG ***BAT-WINGS,*** AND IT TURNED TO ***SMOKE*** WHEN I SURPRISED IT...

MASTER, IF WHAT SHE'S SAYING IS ***TRUE...!***

SHE COULD HAVE SIMPLY LEARNED OF THE SUCCUBUS IN A DEMONOLOGICAL TOME, AND --

SUCCUBUS? IS THAT WHAT WE'RE UP AGAINST?

AND HOW CAN YOU EVEN ***THINK*** I'D BE BEHIND THIS STUFF AFTER WE...***MERGED,*** OR WHATEVER?!

DIDN'T YOU LEARN ***ANYTHING*** ABOUT ME?!

THE SUCCUBUS IS A BREED OF INFERNAL MINION THAT ***SEDUCES*** ITS VICTIMS, THEN ***DRAINS*** THEM OF LIFE AS THEY ARE CAUGHT IN ITS EMBRACE.

IF THEY APPEAR IN MALE FORM, THEY ARE SOMETIMES CALLED "***INCUBUS***," BUT THEY DO NOT ***TRULY*** HAVE A GENDER.

THEY MERELY APPEAR AS WHATEVER THE ***VICTIM*** FINDS ATTRACTIVE.

THEY ARE AN ABSOLUTE ***ABOMINATION*** TO MY GUILD. THEY USE INTIMACY AS A ***TRAP.*** THEY MAKE A ***MOCKERY*** OF OUR MOST SACRED BELIEFS.

UNFORTUNATELY, OUR CARNAL NATURE MAKES US ***SUSCEPTIBLE*** TO THE SUCCUBUS' ATTACK. WHEN ONE PREYS ON A TANTRIC TEMPLE, IT CAN QUICKLY ***DECIMATE*** THAT CONCLAVE.

BUT ***NEVER*** HAS ONE INVADED THE TANTRIC ***CATHEDRAL!*** SEE WHAT YOU HAVE VISITED UPON US?

BUT, I ***TOLD*** YOU I DIDN'T--

I DON'T CARE IF YOU ***INTENDED*** IT, MISERY FOLLOWS YOU WHEREVER YOU GO!

GET OUT, GISELLE VILLARD! IT WAS A ***MISTAKE*** EVER ALLOWING YOU WITHIN THESE WALLS!

I DON'T BELIEVE THIS--! EVERYTHING WAS GOING SO WELL...

WAS IT? THEY WERE ALL TOO READY TO BELIEVE YOU WOULD TURN ON THEM.

MAKES ONE WONDER IF IT IS EVEN ***WORTH*** IT, SUCKING UP TO THESE GUILD MASTERS, ONE AFTER THE NEXT.

START TALKING, PAL. HOW DID YOU KNOW ABOUT MY ***SIGIL,*** AND WHY DID YOU ***FORGE*** IT ON THOSE POOR PEOPLE YOU DRAINED BACK THERE?

AND WHY IN THE ***WORLD*** WOULD YOU APPEAR TO ME LIKE THIS WHEN YOU KNOW I'M OUT TO ***GET*** YOU?

MY MASTERS BADE ME ***SPEAK*** WITH YOU AND EXTEND AN INVITATION. THEY ARE MOST EAGER TO ***BEFRIEND*** YOU...

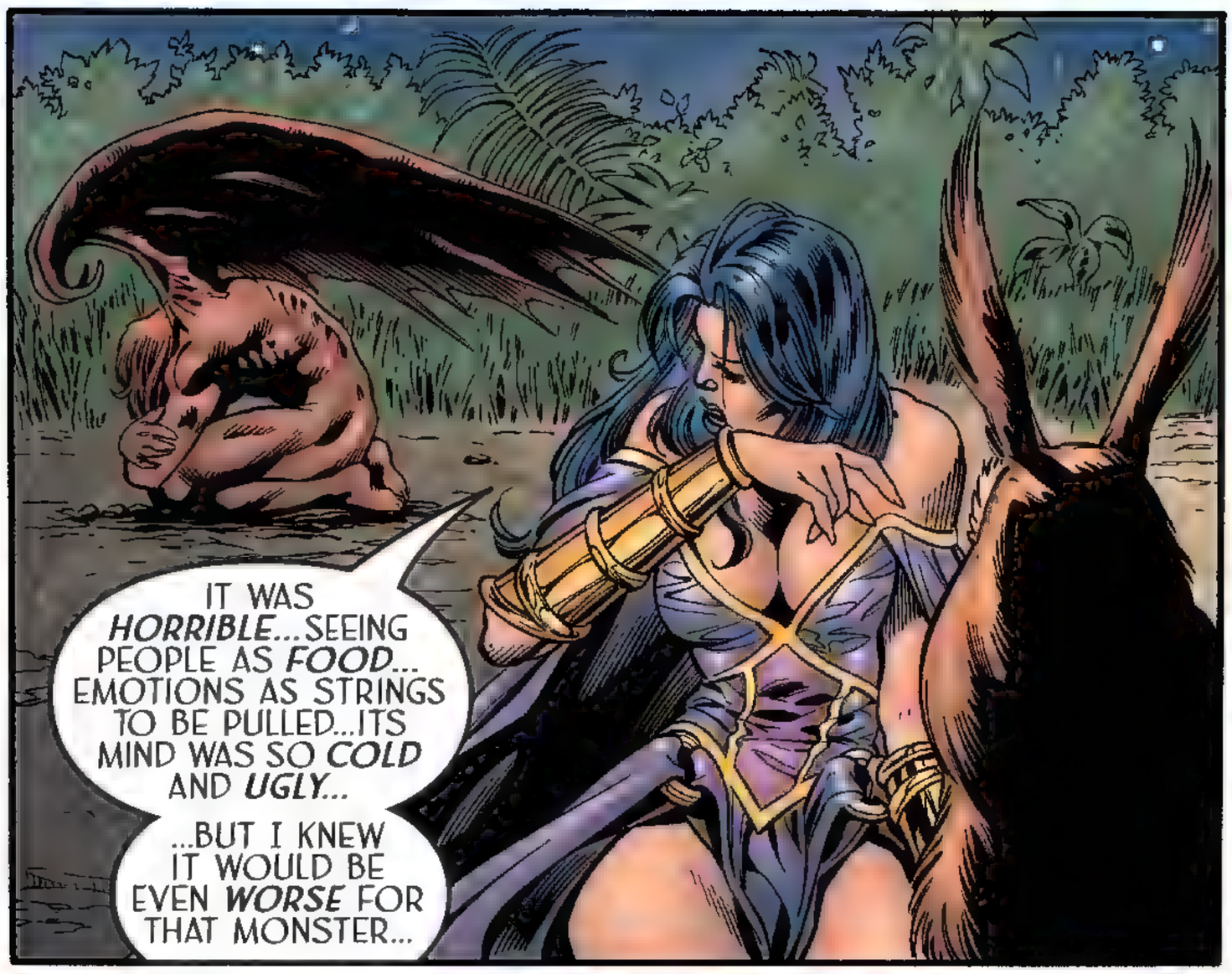
Giselle, **don't listen!** Whatever this thing says, it's all to **seduce** you. That's all it does: it **lies** and it **kills!**

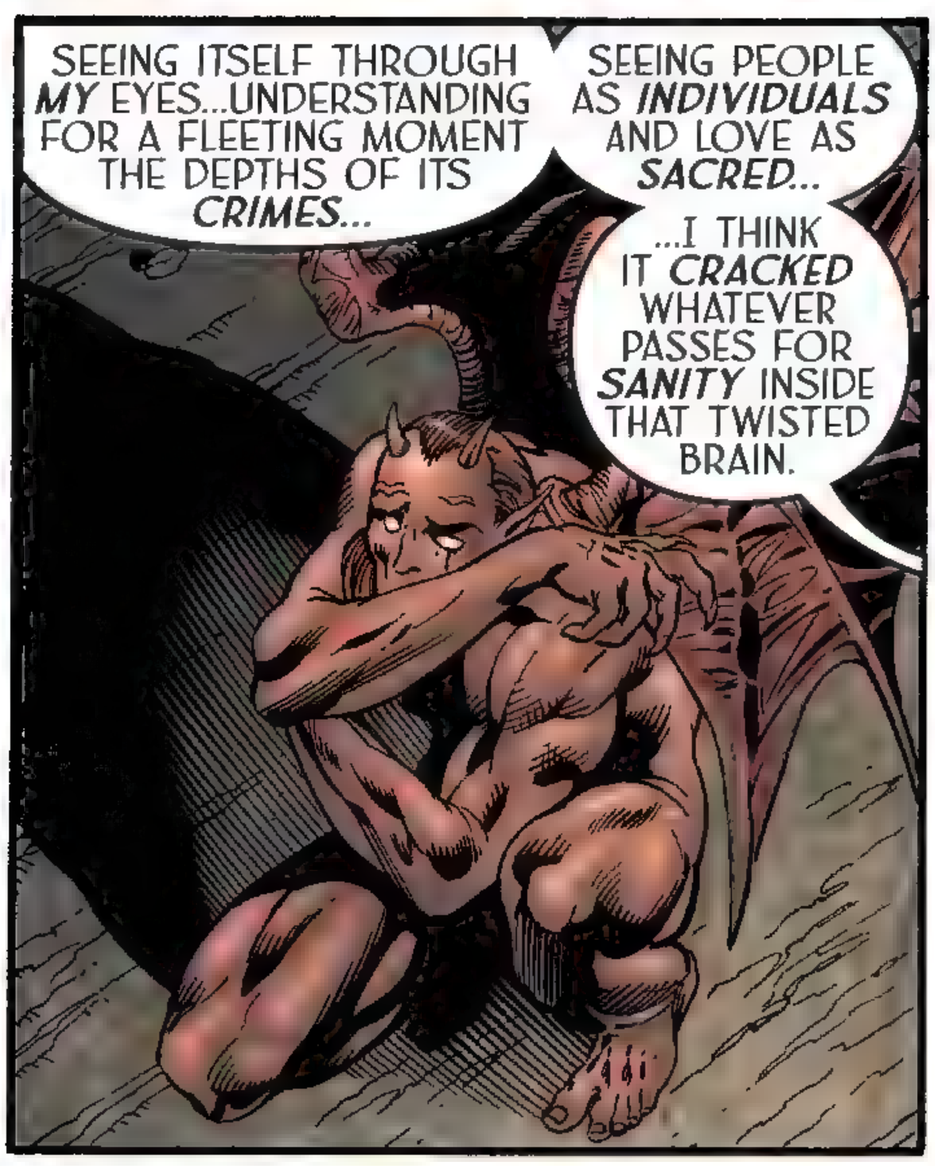
THE MASTERS DID NOT WARN ME ABOUT ANY ***TALKING SQUITS...***

APPARENTLY, THEY DIDN'T WARN YOU ENOUGH ABOUT ***ME.***

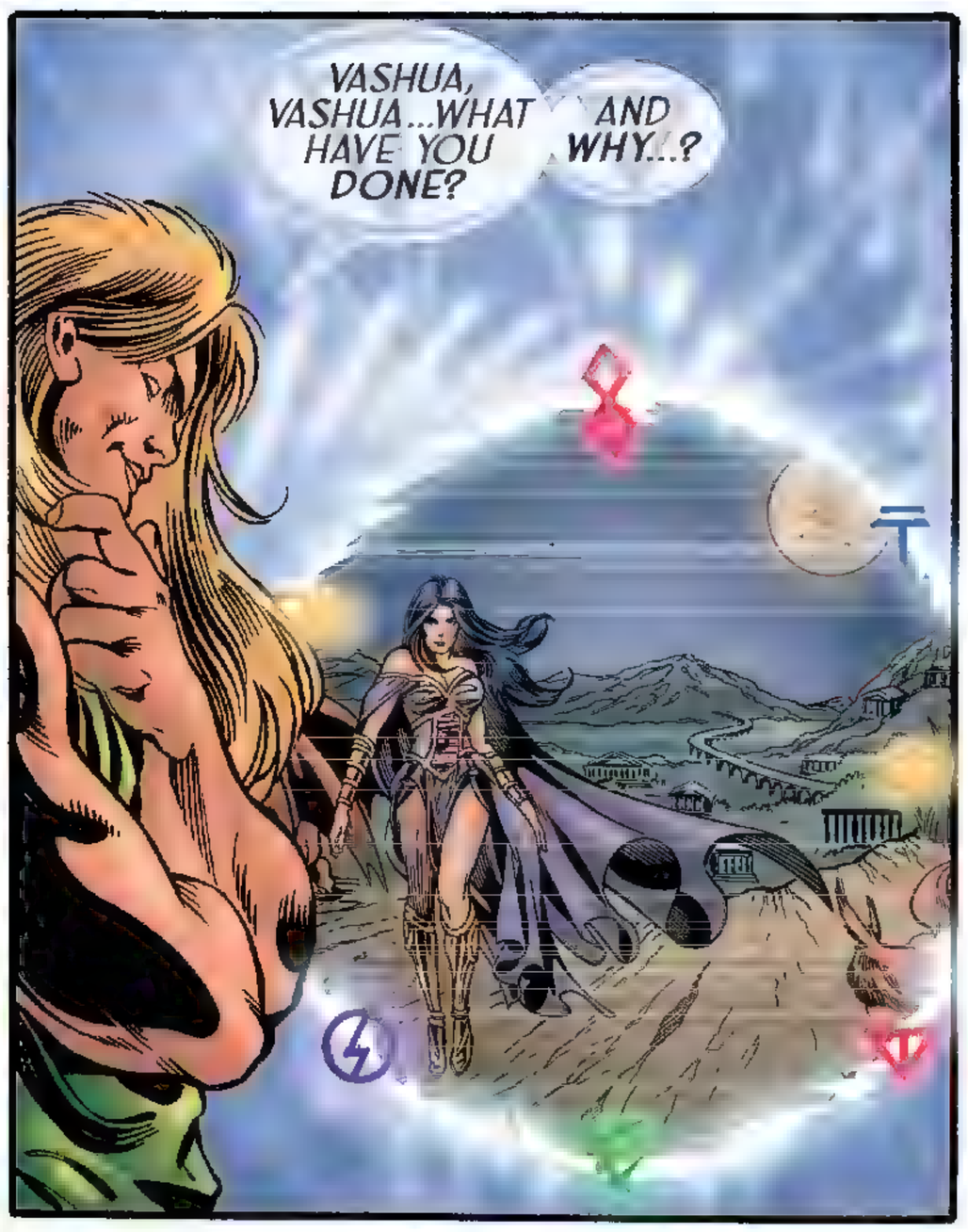
Giselle!

Giselle! You okay? Why'd you do that?!
That was the master spell Vashua showed you, right? What did you think would happen, seeing the world through a demon's eyes?
haughhh


IT WAS HORRIBLE...SEEING PEOPLE AS FOOD... EMOTIONS AS STRINGS TO BE PULLED...ITS MIND WAS SO COLD AND UGLY...
...BUT I KNEW IT WOULD BE EVEN WORSE FOR THAT MONSTER...


SEEING ITSELF THROUGH MY EYES...UNDERSTANDING FOR A FLEETING MOMENT THE DEPTHS OF ITS CRIMES...
SEEING PEOPLE AS INDIVIDUALS AND LOVE AS SACRED...
...I THINK IT CRACKED WHATEVER PASSES FOR SANITY INSIDE THAT TWISTED BRAIN.

A TANTRIC SECURITY PATROL SHOULD FIND HIM BEFORE THE NIGHT IS THROUGH.
Maybe then they'll realize what a mistake they made with you.


VASHUA, VASHUA...WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?
AND WHY...?

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MYSTIC

Tony Bedard Al Rio Roland Paris Matt Milla

"EVER MET A REAL LIVE *GODDESS?* YOU'D KNOW FOR SURE IF YOU *HAD.*

"HAPPENED TO *ME* THE NIGHT I LOST MY LAST *JOB.*

"IT WUZ SORT OF *FACTORY* WORK. I RAN *SECURITY* FOR THE JOINT, AND I WUZ EARNIN' REAL GOOD.

"THEN *SHE* COMES OUT OF NOWHERE AND SHUTS THE PLACE DOWN IN TWO POKES OF A PITCHFORK.

"I FELL IN *LOVE* WITH HER IN HALF THAT TIME."

"ACTUALLY, I'D HEARD ABOUT HER ***BEFORE*** THAT FROM MY COUSIN ***MOMO***. BUT I THOUGHT HE WUZ JUST BLOWIN' HOT AIR TILL I SAW HER IN PERSON.

"SOON AS I MADE BAIL, I TRIED WARNIN' ***THE DUKE*** THAT WE WUZ UP AGAINST ONE HELLUVA BIG-GUN ***MYSTIC*** HERE. HE DIDN'T WANNA HEAR IT.

"COME TO FIND OUT LATER DUKE ACTUALLY LAID A ***TRAP*** FOR HER IN HER OWN CRIB!

"WUZN'T MUCH ***LEFT*** OF DUKE ABADDON AFTER THE MYSTIC FINISHED WITH ***HIM,*** I CAN TELL YA..."

Er...MAYBE YOU *SHOULDN'T* TELL ME, DOMO. I MEAN, THIS STUFF SOUNDS, Y'KNOW... *INCRIMINATING.*

I'M NOT PASSING JUDGMENT, Y'UNDERSTAND. I'D JUST RATHER NOT GET *INVOLVED.*

I KNOW, PAUL. BUT I *HAVETA* TELL YOU. IT'S *IMPORTANT.*

SEE, WITH THE DUKE OUTTA THE PICTURE, ALL THE YEGS IN MY CREW JOINED OTHER OUTFITS RIGHT AWAY.

MOST OF US ARE NO GOOD WITHOUT A *BOSS*--IT'S JUST HOW WE *ARE.*

PEOPLE OF...um...*INFERNAL* EXTRACTION, YOU MEAN. YES, I *WONDERED* WHY...

...WELL, WHY DIDN'T YOU JUST *BLINK* BACK TO THE INFERNAL PLANES ONCE YOUR MASTER WAS, um...

RUBBED OUT?

DUKE PAID OFF SOMEONE AT THE IMMIGRATION AND CONJURATION SERVICE TO FIX IT SO MY *BLACK CARD* DON'T EXPIRE TILL NEXT YEAR.

SO, LIKE I WUZ SAYIN', THE OTHER GUYS ALL GOT NEW GIGS, BUT NOBODY WANTED *ME.*

MY LAST THREE BOSSES GOT *WHACKED.* PEOPLE ARE SAYIN' I'M *JINXED!*

SO I TOOK THIS JOB TO MAKE RENT, BUT WHO'M I *KIDDIN'?* I'M A CREATURE OF *HABIT,* PAUL. I WUZ NEVER CUT OUT FOR AN HONEST LIVING.

ANYHOO... I GUESS THIS MEANS I *QUIT.* SORRY TA *SPRING* IT ON YA...

...BUT LAST NIGHT I FINALLY NOODLED OUT HOW TO *BREAK* MY OWN JINX...

...CUZ IF I'M RIGHT, THEN I GOT AN INSIDE TRACK ON THE *MYSTIC...*

Eh?

SECURITY!

WHAT COULD GET IN PAST THE CATHEDRAL *WARDS?*

JUST BE READY WITH THAT *STAFF!*

SORRY, GUYS...

...BELIEVE IT OR NOT, I THOUGHT THIS WOULD BE A *LOW-KEY* WAY TO DROP IN!

Oh, I *BELIEVE* IT. MAYBE YOU SHOULD START *CALLING AHEAD,* GISELLE.

GENTLEMEN, YOU'RE DISMISSED.

SO. GUESS WHERE I JUST CAME FROM...?

MASTER VASHUA TOLD ME SHE ACTUALLY ASKED YOU TO *LEAVE* THE TANTRIC LANDS. DON'T TELL ME YOU MANAGED TO *EMBARRASS* THE GUILD-WITH-NO-SHAME--?

Considering your sister was running amuck at "skin central," it was pretty tame.

ACTUALLY, SOME PRETTY TROUBLING STUFF WENT DOWN.

I CAN'T DECIDE IF VASHUA IS *IN* SOME KIND OF TROUBLE--OR TRYING TO *START* SOME.

WELL...SHE'S ALWAYS BEEN TEMPERAMENTAL, BUT...I'LL LOOK INTO IT.

THANKS. BY THE WAY, I HOPE I DIDN'T POP IN AT AN AWKWARD MOMENT. Y'KNOW...*THIERRY*-WISE?

NOT TODAY...

...BUT, LIKE I *SAID:* START CALLING AHEAD.

IT'S GOOD YOU'RE HERE, GISELLE. THERE'S SOMETHING I NEED TO SPEAK WITH YOU ABOUT.

ACTUALLY, IT'S SOMETHING ONE OF MY MINISTERS BROUGHT UP AT A SENIOR STAFF CONCLAVE. I'LL LET *HIM* EXPLAIN...

TING

MINISTER ELZEAR TO THE NORTH RECEPTION CHAPEL *IMMEDIATELY.*

TING TING TING

MASTER VILLARD IS...
IS SOMETHING *AMISS*? THIS IS RATHER AN *ODD* HOUR TO... TO...

MINISTER ELZEAR, PLEASE TELL MY *SISTER* WHAT YOU TOLD ME AT THE LAST MEETING.

...YES... GOOD MORNING, MISS VILLARD. I...

I SIMPLY POINTED OUT THAT IN THE WAKE OF YOUR RATHER...*HIGH-PROFILE* PART IN THE WAR AGAINST ANIMORA...

...*AND* YOUR RECENT ACTIVITIES WITH THE MASTERS OF THE SHAMAN, DJINN, ASTRAL AND TANTRIC LANDS...

...WELL... THERE ARE *MANY* AROUND THE GLOBE WHO HAVE *WITNESSED* YOUR MYSTIC ABILITIES FIRST-HAND.

THE SENIOR STAFF IS *CONCERNED*.

CERTAIN *RUMORS* ABOUT THE NOUVEAU MASTER'S *SISTER* HAVE LATELY GAINED CURRENCY IN THE PRESS AND ON THE SCRY-NET.

WE HAVE TO GET OUT *IN FRONT* OF THIS ISSUE BEFORE IT'S ALL OVER THE NEWS, OR WE WILL LOOK LIKE WE'VE BEEN *HIDING* SOMETHING FROM THE--

THE PUBLIC, ELZEAR, HAS A RIGHT TO KNOW CERTAIN THINGS ABOUT ***MY*** PRIVATE LIFE, BUT ***NOT*** GISELLE'S.

I WANTED TO SAY THIS IN FRONT OF ***BOTH*** OF YOU: THE NOUVEAU GUILD WILL DO ***NOTHING*** TO REIN IN OR CONTROL MY SISTER'S LIFE. SHE IS ***OFF LIMITS.*** AM I ***CLEAR*** ON THIS?

Y-YES...

YOU'RE DISMISSED, MINISTER.

IS IT JUST ME OR DID YOU JUST ***WITCH-SLAP*** THAT MAN?

I KNOW. I'M ***BAD,*** AREN'T I?

SERIOUSLY, I HAD TO NIP ELZEAR'S LITTLE POWER PLAY IN THE BUD. BUT HE MAKES A ***GOOD POINT,*** GISELLE.

Yeah, toots. Are you **planning** your coming-out party...or just waiting till you're "outed?"

...

I'M *TELLING* YOU, I HAVEN'T SEEN HER SINCE BEFORE MY *MASTER* DISAPPEARED!

NOW SCRAM, BEFORE YOU GET ME IN HOT WATER WITH MY NEW BOSS--

SAVE IT, MOMO. JUST TELL ME WHERE TA *FIND* THE MYSTIC, *NOW!*

I SWEAR, IF YOU WUZN'T BLOOD, I'D CUT YER GREEDY *HANDS* OFF FOR HOLDIN' OUT ON ME.

IT'S *BECAUSE* YOU'RE MY COUSIN THAT I'M NOT SAYIN'! I'M TRYIN' TO SAVE YOU SOME *GRIEF!*

YOU *DO* KNOW WHO SHE IS, DON'TCHA? I *SWEAR* TO YA, MOMO, MY *WHOLE FUTURE* IS AT STAKE! I *GOTTA* MEET HER!

=SIGH=

ALL I'LL TELL YOU IS SHE SOMETIMES HANGS OUT AT A NIGHTCLUB CALLED *JAZZRAT'S.*

BUT IF YOU *SEE* HER, DON'T DO NOTHING *STUPID!* IF SHE COULD MAKE A CHUMP OUT OF *DARROW,* SHE'LL SQUASH *YOU* LIKE A BUG!

GISELLE, IT'S GEN. I KNOW IT'S SHORT NOTICE, BUT HOW ABOUT JOINING ME FOR DINNER?

I PROMISE IT'S A PLACE I KNOW YOU LIKE. COME ON!

Poor kid must be getting stir-crazy, cooped up in that cathedral.

I'M JUST GLAD THAT *HAVING A LIFE* IS BECOMING A PRIORITY FOR HER...

...ALTHOUGH I *AM* CURIOUS HOW SHE'LL KEEP A STATE VISIT TO JAZZRAT'S LOW PROFILE.

JAZZRAT'S

I DON'T SEE HER. MAYBE WE GOT HERE *FIRST*...?

JAZZ RAT'S

COME, GISELLE. OUR TABLE IS THIS WAY.

HEY--!

YOU'RE GONNA HAVE TO WORK ON YOUR PICK-UP LINES, MISTER.

PICK-UP...? Oh, 'ELLE, THAT IS ***SO*** WRONG IN SO MANY WAYS...

GENEVIEVE--?!

IT WAS EITHER *THIS,* OR BRING A SECURITY DETAIL ALONG, AND PUTTING THIS PLACE UNDER MARSHAL LAW SORT OF DEFEATS THE POINT OF HAVING A QUIET GIRL'S NIGHT OUT.

VERY COOL, GEN. MAYBE WE'LL EVEN GET THROUGH DINNER WITHOUT THE WORLD FALLING APART.

Don't be too hasty...

'SCUSE ME, GREAT LADY. I DON'T MEAN TA INTERRUPT, BUT DO YA MIND IF I *SPEAK* WITH YOU FER A MINUTE...?

YOU...

YOU WERE AT MANION'S LITTLE "*FACTORY*."

YOU *REMEMBER* ME. I'M... *HONORED.*

SHOULDN'T YOU BE IN *JAIL?*

NOTHIN' WUZ GONNA KEEP ME FROM YER SIDE.

EXCUSE ME?

I COME TA PLEDGE MY *ETERNAL DEVOTION.* TO YA. I'M YERS TA COMMAND...IF YOU'LL *HAVE* ME.

I'VE *SEEN* YA IN ACTION, AND YER...YER THE BLAZIN' *QUEEN* O' *DEATH...!*

Talk about your bad pick-up lines--!

I'M ONLY ASKIN' TA *SERVE* YA...

...TA BE AN *INSTRUMENT* OF YER TERRIBLE *WRATH.*

CUT IT OUT! YOU'RE *EMBARRASSING* ME IN FRONT OF ALL THESE *PEOPLE--!*

UNDERSTOOD.

I'LL *FIX* THE PROBLEM.

GISELLE!

SEE? I CAME PREPARED!

KA-KRAKKA-KRAKKA-KRAKKA-KRAKKA-KRAKKA-

I *KNEW* YOU'D PUT ME TO THE TEST!

GEN!

GOT IT!

SEVEN SPIRITS--!

ZING

SPANG

ZING

NICE SAVE, *SIS.*

I'LL TEACH IT TO YOU *LATER...*

"...RIGHT NOW I'M JUST GLAD YOU STOPPED HIM FROM FIRING ANY *MORE*."

KRUNCH

KRAK

DEMON, WHO IS YOUR *MASTER?* WHAT IS YOUR *BUSINESS* ON THIS PLANE?

WHAT THE--? YER THE NOUVEAU GUILD *MASTER...?*

AN' DID MY MYSTIC JUST CALL YOU HER *SISTER?!*

SO IT'S *YOU* WHAT GAVE HER THE POWER! YOU... YOU WUZ BEHIND THIS WHOLE MYSTIC RUMOR IN THE *FIRST* PLACE, WEREN'T-CHA?!

IT WUZ ALL JUST A *TRICK* TO RUB OUT THE *MOBS!*

YA CAN'T *DO* THIS!

YA CAN'T GIVE A GUY A REASON TA *LIVE* AND THEN *RIP IT AWAY!*

FINE! I AIN'T AFRAID TA *DIE*...

PLINK

PLINK

...AND YER *ALL* COMIN' *WITH* ME!

TIME TO *GO*, GEN!

SOTTO

WHERE IN THE--?!

'ELLE...

GOT 'EM.

BOOM!

BOOM!

PLINK

PLINK

STOP IT! STOP--

--IT.

...NO...

WHY...?

WHY DOES *EVERYTHING* I DO TURN TA *GARBAGE*?

I WISH I'D NEVER BEEN *SUMMONED*. NONE OF US EVER BELONGED ON CIRESS, MUCH LESS ON THIS *PLANE*...

...PLEASE JUST KILL ME... JUST...

...GET IT *OVER* WITH...

I'VE SEEN THIS *BEFORE* WITH INFERNAL MINIONS. EVEN IF YOU DON'T DO A THING, HE'LL DISSIPATE SOON.

THEY NEVER LAST LONG HERE WITHOUT A *PURPOSE*.

GEN...

...HELP ME GET HIM IN THE TROVE CELLAR, THEN GIVE US A MINUTE *ALONE*...

RISE, MY DARKLING SERVANT!

Huh?

YOU HAD THE BAD TIMING OF APPROACHING ME WHEN I WAS WITH THE ***NOUVEAU MASTER.***

NOW THAT SHE BELIEVES YOU ***DEAD,*** SHE HAS RETURNED HOME. THE ***FOOL.***

AND NOW I CAN SHOW MY ***TRUE*** FACE.

I SHOULD FLAY YOU ALIVE FOR NEARLY UPSETTING MY ***INFILTRATION*** OF THE NOUVEAU GUILD, ***BUT...***

...YOUR DEVOTION HAS ***TOUCHED*** ME.

THEN...YOU ***WUZ*** JUST TESTIN' MY WORTHINESS. Oh, MY MYSTIC, I'LL FOLLOW YOU ANYWHERE... DO ***ANY***THIN'--

YES, I ***DO*** HAVE A TASK FOR YOU. A ***MOST*** IMPORTANT MISSION...

...***HERE...*** UP ON THE SACRED MOON... NOT DOWN AMONG THE MORTAL ***CATTLE...***

...WHICH BRINGS US BACK TO THE FACT THAT PEOPLE ARE GOING TO MAKE WHATEVER THEY WANT OUT OF YOU UNLESS YOU CONTROL YOUR ***OWN*** STORY.

DEMON DEATH-GODDESS. SMART-WEAPON. MYSTIC. STOOGE.

IT SEEMS LIKE EVERYONE HAS TRIED TO IMPOSE THEIR OWN VIEW OF YOU ***UPON*** YOU.

LET'S GIVE IT SOME THOUGHT AND FIGURE OUT HOW ***YOU*** WANT PEOPLE TO SEE YOU BEFORE THIS GETS EVEN MORE OUT OF HAND.

YOU THINK WE SHOULD SAY THAT I'M SOME KIND OF NOUVEAU ***SOLDIER-MAGE*** OR SOMETHING? AT LEAST MY ***DRESS*** LOOKS THE PART...

Folks are going to **check out** your story, kid. If they find out that the Guild spirits are in **you** now, instead of where they **oughtta** be--

--INSIDE ***MYSELF,*** AND THE SIX ***OTHER*** PEOPLE WHO RUN THE WORLD'S GOVERNMENTS...

YES, I ***HAVE*** CONSIDERED WHAT A TRICKY STORY THIS WILL BE TO SPIN.

AT LEAST THERE'S ***SOMEONE*** WHO DOESN'T HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT HIS FUTURE ANYMORE...

YOU *HEARD* HER, GUYS...

THE MYSTIC CHARGED ME WITH A ***SACRED MISSION***-- CLEANIN' UP AND CARIN' FER HER SECRET SANCTUM!

YOU FAIRY-FOLK'VE GOTTEN A FREE RIDE IN THIS JOINT FER TOO LONG! TIME TO EARN YER ***KEEP!***

YER HEARBY ***RECRUITED*** TA GET THE PLACE SPIC-AN'-SPAN. ***NOW, GET TA WORK!***

I FIGURE WE SHOULD HAVE THE WHOLE PLACE DONE IN ABOUT A HUNNERD YEARS...

KEY ISSUE

MYSTIC™

Tony Bedard
Aaron Lopresti
Matt Ryan
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Uh-oh...

BROTHER MARCEAU! I NEED *HELP!*

ETIENNE--! IF WE LIVE THROUGH THIS, I'M GOING TO--

I KNOW... I KNOW...

HEY, um...WE DON'T HAVE TO TROUBLE THE *GUILD MASTER* WITH THIS LITTLE MISHAP...RIGHT?

TOO LATE! SHE'S *ALREADY* ON THE WAY!

BROTHER ETIENNE!

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE *THIS* TIME?

MASTER VILLARD, I'M SO ***SORRY!*** I TRIED TO SUMMON A WILL-O'-THE-WISP FROM THE SUBTLE PLANES, AND INSTEAD I GET THESE ***REVENANTS...***

ZHO

REVENANTS. GREAT.

DO YOU REALIZE HOW MUCH ***POWER*** IT'LL TAKE TO SEND THEM ***BACK?***

bother.

FWASH

SKITTER?!

SKRAK!

SKITTER, HOW IN THE FOUR MOONS DID YOU--

We gotta **talk,** Genevieve. It's important-- can we ditch the **crowd**?

YOU DON'T USUALLY TALK IN FRONT OF STRANGERS, MUCH LESS THROW AROUND THAT KIND OF POWER.

SOMETHING'S VERY ***WRONG***... ISN'T IT?

Giselle's **missing.**

NOT AGAIN...! I'LL HAVE A SECURITY DETAIL SEARCH THE NIGHTCLUBS--

...OKAY.

GUARDS, ESCORT BROTHER ETIENNE TO HIS QUARTERS.

No. This isn't like before.

Before, I **let** her wander, stay out all night, whatever, because I knew there were things she needed to work out for **herself.**

YOU "*LET*" HER?

This time, I can't sense her anywhere. She's no longer on Ciress, or even up in her lunar sanctum...

"...Giselle has **vanished** without a trace."

...mm... STOP...

I *SAID* --

...SKITTER, *STOP* IT...!

YOU'RE NOT SKITTER...!

GRROUWRR

SORRY, KITTY...

SNRRRRL

WHERE ON CIRESS *AM* I..?

DOWN, BOY. I DON'T WANT TO *HURT* YOU...

...IF ONLY YOU FELT THE *SAME...*

RRRROOAARR!

HISSS

RRRRRRRR

Um... FELLAS...?

CHOMP

SEVEN SPIRITS!

YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO *KILL* THE BIG KITTY, DID YOU?

?

I MEAN, NOT TO SOUND ***UNAPPRECIATIVE,*** BUT I COULD'VE HANDLED HIM MYSELF! A LITTLE ***SNARE SPELL,*** AND NOBODY HAD TO GET ***HURT...***

ANYWAY, COULD YOU TELL ME WHERE WE *ARE?* SEE, I WENT TO BED IN MY *APARTMENT* LAST NIGHT, AND...

SNIFF SNIFF

OKAY, SORRY-- FIRST THINGS FIRST. MY NAME'S *GISELLE VILLARD*. HOW DO YOU DO? YOU'RE THE FIRST ACTUAL *DRAGON* I'VE EVER MET.

I'VE HEARD YOU'RE ALL SUPPOSED TO BE STICKLERS FOR *ETIQUETTE,* SO I HOPE YOU'LL CUT ME SOME SLACK IF I SEEMED *RUDE,* BUT... ah...

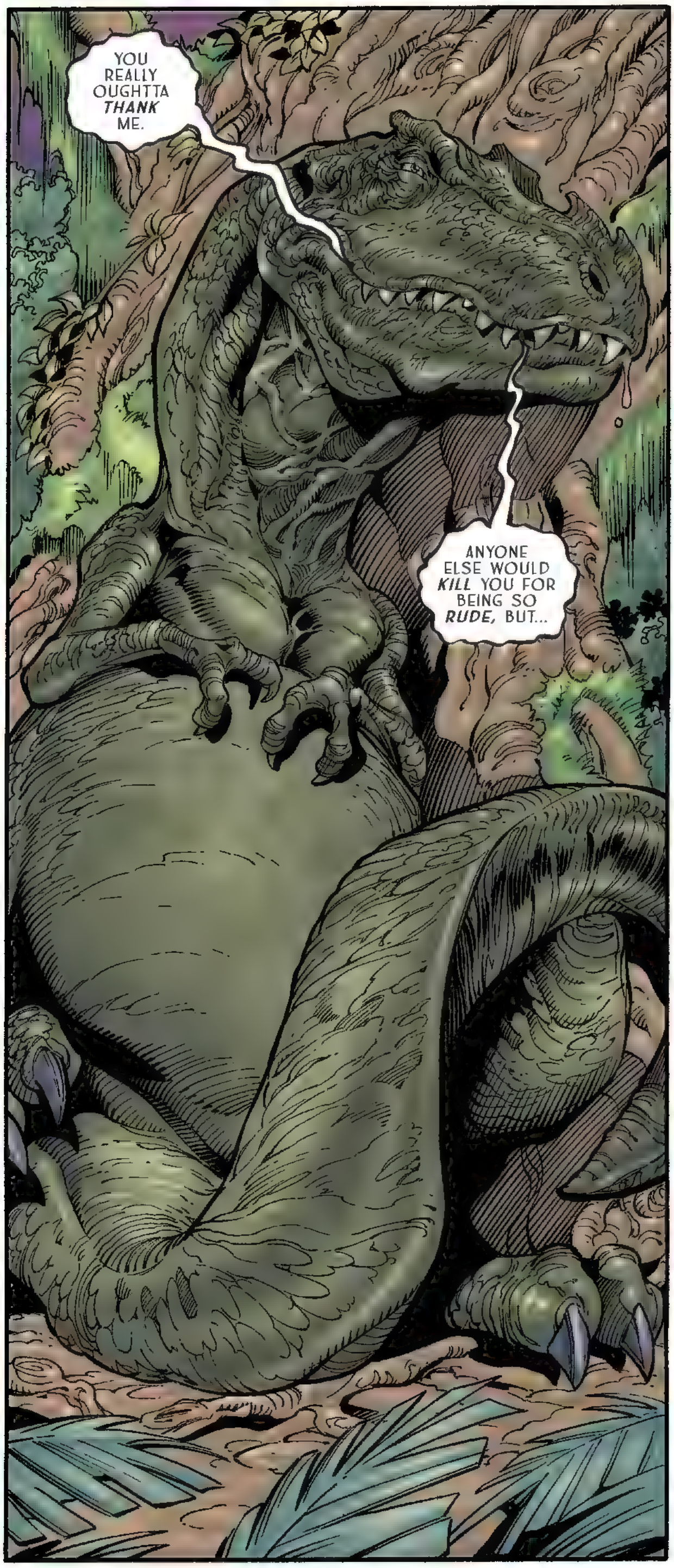
...YOU DON'T *UNDERSTAND* A THING I'M SAYING... *DO* YOU?

WHAT KIND OF DRAGON *ARE* YOU, ANYWAY...?

RRRRRRRRRRRR

RROOARR!

CHOMP


YOU REALLY OUGHTTA *THANK* ME.
ANYONE ELSE WOULD *KILL* YOU FOR BEING SO *RUDE,* BUT...
...I DON'T WEAR *FUR.* I DON'T EAT *MEAT.* I DON'T HURT DUMB *ANIMALS.*
WORST YOU'LL GET FROM ME IS A *HANGOVER.*
COUNT YOURSELF *LUCKY.*

ON THE OTHER HAND, THE SON-OF-A-*WITCH* WHO MADE SURE I WOKE UP *HERE* GETS A ONE-WAY TICKET TO THE *PLANE OF PAIN*...

SHANK

...AFTER HE PAYS MY BILL AT *KONJURE-KLEEN!*

KRAK

THERE.

LONG AS I'M IN THE TROPICS, I MAY AS WELL DRESS TO *IMPRESS*...

...WOULDN'T YOU *AGREE?*

Oh, COME ON *OUT*--YOU'RE *NOT* FOOLING ANYONE.

THANKS.

NOW, CAN ONE OF YOU POINT ME TO THE LOCAL *GUILD TEMPLE*--OR AT LEAST THE NEAREST *CITY?* I GOTTA CALL MY *SISTER*...

<WE HAVE TO TAKE HER TO THE *SACHEM.*>

Um...D'YA MIND SPEAKING *CIRESSIAN,* PLEASE...? I'M NOT SO GOOD WITH *DIALECTS.*

Oh, NEVER MIND.

HEY, SPIRITS, ARE YOU ***LISTENING?*** I COULD USE A LITTLE ***WISDOM OF THE ANCIENTS*** RIGHT ABOUT NOW...

E-TERNAL ***SPI-RITS...?***

HEL-LO...?

WHY THE HEX AREN'T THEY ***ANSWERING...?***

I KNOW, FELLAS, I SOUND LIKE THERE'S A ***CRACK*** IN MY CAULDRON. BUT THERE'S A SIMPLE EXPLANATION.

SEE, IT'S ALL GOT TO DO WITH THIS ***THING*** ON MY HAND...

A FEW MONTHS AGO, I WAS AT MY SISTER'S RITE OF ASCENSION-- WHICH WAS A PRETTY BIG DEAL. ALL THE GUILD MASTERS WERE THERE.

ANYWAY, SOME ***STRANGER*** SLIPPED THIS MAGIC ***SIGIL*** ONTO MY PALM WHEN I SHOOK HIS HAND--

--AND A MINUTE LATER, IT SUCKED THE SEVEN ETERNAL SPIRITS ***OUT*** OF THE GUILD MASTERS AND ***TRAPPED*** THEM IN ***ME***.

BELIEVE ME, IF THIS WAS SOME KIND OF PRACTICAL JOKE, ***NOBODY*** WAS LAUGHING!

AND GET THIS: I STILL HAVE ***NO IDEA*** WHO THE CREEP WAS THAT PUT THIS THING ***ON*** ME!

HEY, YOU THINK THE ***SAME GUY*** MIGHT'VE LEFT ME ***HERE...?***

<WONDER IF SHE'S FIGURED OUT SHE'S OUR ***PRISONER*** YET?>

<I ***HOPE*** NOT!>

Oh, ***C'MON!*** YOU'VE GOTTA KNOW ***SOME*** CIRESSIAN! YOU LOOK KIND OF SHAMAN, BUT THE ACCENT'S CLOSER TO DJINN...

SO IS THIS THE SHAMAN RIFT VALLEY? OR MAYBE AN ***ISLAND*** IN THE DJINN ARCHIPELAG--

--oh.

<THIS IS YOUR NEW HOME: ***VARDAN REE.***>

Um... WHERE'S ALL THE ***OTHER MOONS...?***

WHOA! FRIENDS OF YOURS?

<MUD-HUNTERS!>

OGG!

<HURRY! WE HAVE TO *HELP* THEM!>

WHAT IS *WRONG* WITH YOU PEOPLE?

NEVER HEARD OF A *SHIELD SPELL*, OR A--

THAP

--=OOF=

AIEEEE!

AHHHHHHHHH!

<FIGHT! DON'T LET THEM LAND!>

<DON'T LET THEM ESCAPE!>

THAP

--ah?!

WATCH YOUR STEP, HANDSOME--!

EEEEYAAAA!

OKAY, NOW JUST KEEP YOUR HEADS LOW A SECOND...

SHRAKT

SHRAKT

WHAT?

SEVEN SPIRITS, YOU'D THINK NONE OF YOU EVER SAW *MAGIC* BEFORE--!

UNLESS...

...aw,no... THIS ISN'T CIRESS AT ALL...*IS* IT...?!

...AN INVESTIGATION BY NOUVEAU SECURITY CONCLUDES THAT MY SISTER WAS LAST SEEN ENTERING HER APARTMENT BUILDING, AND NEVER CAME BACK OUT.

SO EITHER SHE USED A ***TELEPORT*** SPELL, OR SUMMONED A GATE TO ANOTHER ***PLANE***...

...OR SOME ***OTHER*** PARTY TOOK HER FROM HER OWN HOME.

AND CONSIDERING THAT GISELLE HAS SO MUCH POWER AT HER DISPOSAL THAT NOT EVEN THE ***DEMON QUEEN*** *COULD DEFEAT HER...*

YES. WHAT FORCE ON CIRESS COULD ***ABDUCT HER?***

THE ***IMPLICATIONS*** ARE DARK INDEED, BUT EVEN ***MORE*** DISTURBING IS THE POSSIBILITY THAT THE ***ETERNAL SPIRITS*** OF OUR GUILDS ARE FOREVER LOST ***WITH*** HER.

HOW DO YOU PROPOSE TO ***COMPENSATE*** US FOR SUCH A LOSS?

TYPICAL, MAGUS...

...MY ***SISTER*** *IS MISSING, AND YOU SEEK TO* ***PROFIT*** *FROM IT!*

WORRY ABOUT ***YOUR OWN*** FUTURE, GENEVIEVE VILLARD. YOUR FAMILY MAY WELL HAVE ***DESTROYED*** OUR WAY OF LIFE.

RECRIMINATIONS CAN **WAIT.** RIGHT NOW, I ASK YOU **EACH** TO CHECK WITH EVERY ALLY AND AGENT YOU HAVE ON THE SUBTLE PLANES FOR **ANY** SIGN OF GISELLE.

HER SAFE RETURN IS IMPORTANT TO **ALL** OF US--→

PATIENCE, MAGUS. YOU'VE ALREADY PROVIDED US WITH THE KEY TO ELIMINATING THE MORE ***TROUBLESOME*** SISTER. GENEVIEVE WILL FOLLOW SOON ENOUGH.

Oh, FOR THE DAY WHEN THOSE TWO SISTERS ARE FOREVER ***EXORCISED*** FROM OUR LIVES.

SHE'D ***BETTER.*** IT WOULD BE ***BAD*** FOR YOU NOT TO DELIVER ON YOUR PROMISES AFTER ***I*** SUCCEEDED IN BANISHING ***GISELLE.***

SPARE ME THE ***EMPTY THREATS,*** MAGUS. YOU'VE BEEN A ***USEFUL*** PAWN, BUT A ***PAWN*** NEVERTHELESS.

KEEP IN MIND THAT THERE IS A ***REASON*** I AM THE ONLY LIVING HUMAN YOU WOULD EVER CALL *"MASTER"*...

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WHAT DID YOU DO TO HER, LeCAVALIER?!

WHERE IS GISELLE?!

MAGUS, NO!

⇒HAKK⇐ ⇒SPUTT⇐

DON'T YOU SEE? THE NOUVEAU SPIRIT HAS PLAYED US ALL FOR FOOLS!

FIRST HE **SEDUCED** US, ONE BY ONE, TO HER SIDE. HE ACTUALLY CONVINCED SOME OF YOU THAT THE GIRL WAS **WORTHY** OF OUR COUNSEL!

BUT NOW THAT SHE HAS FAILED TO WIN OVER THE **TANTRICS**, HE'S GONE TO HIS **BACKUP PLAN!**

WHAT ARE YOU **TALKING** ABOUT...?

THINK ABOUT IT! WHY **ELSE** ARE WE SUDDENLY UNABLE TO COMMUNICATE WITH GISELLE--OR EVEN SENSE HER PRESENCE **AT ALL?!**

IN FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OF THIS GHOSTLY EXISTENCE, HAS ANY ONE OF YOU **EVER** LOST CONTACT WITH A BODY YOU INHABITED?

NO...CAN'T SAY THAT I **HAVE**...

OF COURSE YOU **HAVEN'T!**

WHEN WE FIRST ARRANGED THIS **SYMBIOSIS** WITH OUR SUCCESSORS, WE CAREFULLY **AVOIDED** THE POSSIBILITY OF THIS EVER HAPPENING!

WE MAY EXIST HERE ON THE **SPIRIT PLANE,** BUT OUR **CONNECTION** TO THE PHYSICAL WORLD -- TO THE **MIND** OF THE LIVING BEING HOSTING US -- HAS ALWAYS BEEN UNBREAKABLE.

IF OUR LINK TO GISELLE HAS BEEN SEVERED, IT IS NO COINCIDENCE, NO NATURAL OCCURENCE. EITHER HE **CUT US OFF** DELIBERATELY, OR GISELLE VILLARD **IS DEAD!**

BUT...IF SHE WERE DEAD, WOULDN'T WE **RETURN** TO THE MASTERS OF OUR OWN GUILDS?

WHO KNOWS? THAT DAMNABLE **SIGIL** ON HER PALM WAS WHAT **TRAPPED** US WITHIN HER IN THE FIRST PLACE. COULD ITS HOLD PERSIST **BEYOND** DEATH?

OR PERHAPS SHE LIES SOMEWHERE IN A **TRANCE**...

"...PERHAPS SHE IS **HERSELF** TRAPPED IN A NIGHTMARE FROM WHICH SHE CANNOT AWAKEN."

Um... YOU ALL CAN ***STOP*** DOING THAT ANY TIME NOW...!

OKAY, SO YOU'VE NEVER SEEN ANYONE WORK ***MAGIC*** BEFORE. BIG DEAL.

WHERE I COME FROM, ANYONE AND ***EVERYONE*** KNOWS AT LEAST ***SOME*** MAGIC. IT'S REALLY ***NOT*** THAT SPECIAL.

<PLEASE, GREAT ONE, I DO NOT UNDERSTAND...>

SEVEN SPIRITS! *FIRST* THING I'M DOING WHEN I GET HOME IS TO MEMORIZE A *TRANSLATION SPELL!*

<THE GODS MUST BE *TESTING* ME...>

OKAY, IF WE CAN'T BRIDGE THIS LANGUAGE BARRIER, MAYBE A *VISUAL AID* WILL HELP...

THIS...IS MY HOME, *PLANET CIRESS...*

YOU GUYS *DO* KNOW WHAT A PLANET IS...RIGHT?

<ALL THOSE MOONS...

<DO YOU COME *FROM* THE MOON...? SHOULD WE MAKE LESS SACRIFICES TO THE SUN?>

THIS IS GOING NOWHERE FAST.

DON'T YOU PEOPLE AT LEAST HAVE AN ASTROLOGER, OR *SOME* KIND OF PROTO-MAGIC...?

OKAY, OKAY...I HAVE ONE LAST IDEA. IT'S A LITTLE TRICK I PICKED UP FROM THE *TANTRIC GUILD--*

--NOT EXACTLY A TRANSLATION SPELL, BUT IT *DOES* HELP TWO PEOPLE *UNDERSTAND* EACH OTHER...

<NO! THE SACHEM MUST NOT KNOW THE TOUCH OF A WOMAN!>

HEY!

<STAND DOWN, MEN! THIS ONE WAS SENT BY THE GODS-->

<--I DO NOT THINK THE OLD PROHIBITIONS APPLY TO HER!>

WHATEVER YOU SAID, IT SOUNDED SENSIBLE.

COME ON, GUYS! DON'T MAKE THIS ANY HARDER!

HOPEFULLY, MISSUS JUNGLE-KING WON'T MIND THIS.

ASSUMING THERE IS A MISSUS JUNGLE-KING...

OKAY...WE'RE GONNA SHARE THOUGHTS AND PERCEPTIONS FOR A MOMENT. YOU'LL SEE YOURSELF THROUGH MY EYES, I'LL GET YOUR TAKE ON ME--THAT KIND OF THING.

IT'S A LITTLE MIND-BLOWING, SO BRACE YOURSELF...

=GASP=

...hUnh...

"SACHEM." THAT'S WHAT THEY CALL YOU, RIGHT?

WOW, YOUR *THOUGHTS*... AND *EMOTIONS* WERE SO... *PRIMAL*...

...AND YOU, uh...YOU KINDA *LIKE* ME A LITTLE, DON'T YOU...?

ANY MAN... A FOOL WOULD BE...NOT WANT YOU... SO BEAUTIFUL YOU ARE...

HEXES AND HOKUM, IT WORKED!

WELCOME, GISELLE... THE CITY, THIS IS CALLED VARDAN REE. I AM SACHEM HERE--LEADER.

WOW, YOU PICKED A LOT OUT OF MY HEAD WHILE YOU WERE IN THERE. MY NAME, FOR STARTERS...AND YOUR CIRESSIAN IS ALREADY PRETTY GOOD.

HOW COME I DIDN'T MAKE SENSE OF YOUR LANGUAGE..?

NOT KNOW. NOT CARE. MATTERS ALL THAT SAVED US, DID YOU. SAVED US FROM THE MUD-HUNTERS.

YOU MEAN THOSE APES ON THE GIANT BATS? WHY'D THEY ATTACK YOU GUYS, ANYWAY?

THIS CITY... THIS LIFE WE BUILD WITH OUR HANDS...A TARGET, IT MAKES US. THE MUD-HUNTERS NO BUILD...ONLY DEVOUR.

THEY COME FOR TAKE THE CHILDREN OF VARDAN REE. THEY TAKE CHILDREN, WE NO SEE AGAIN.

BUT YOU COME HELP US GET THEM BACK, YES? PLEASE, GISELLE...

HOPE FOR RESCUE, WE HAVE. LONG TIME, WE HOPE FOR YOU...

STOP LOOKING AT ME LIKE THAT!

YOU CAN'T TELL ME **ANY** OF YOU WOULD TAKE **HIS** WORD OVER **MINE**--!

NEVER MIND IF IT **WAS** THE MAGUS WHO SAID IT, THE **LOGIC** OF HIS ARGUMENT IS COMPELLING.

YOUR NOUVEAU GUILD HAS **PROSPERED** UNDER THIS NEW ARRANGEMENT, WHILE OURS HAVE FOUGHT TO SURVIVE.

YOU ARE AN ACCOMPLISHED TACTICIAN, LeCAVALIER. IF YOU **DID** ENGINEER OUR BONDAGE TO GISELLE FROM THE START, IT WOULD BE YOUR GREATEST COUP EVER.

I WOULDN'T KNOW WHETHER TO **KILL** YOU OR **CONGRATULATE** YOU.

THE MAGUS WOULD FIND THAT CHOICE A **SIMPLE** ONE. COUNT YOURSELF FORTUNATE I CONVINCED HIM TO **LEAVE** UNTIL HE CALMS DOWN.

ARE YOU SO SURE THAT HIS DEPARTURE WAS **YOUR** IDEA? HE'S BEEN VERY **HEARTFELT**, VERY **EARNEST** IN HIS ACCUSATIONS AGAINST ME TODAY...

...SINCE WHEN WAS THE MAGUS KNOWN FOR BEING **EARNEST**?

AND THEN, ONCE THEY ARRIVE, I'LL NEED YOU TO BUY ME SOME TIME UNTIL I CAN USE THE AMULET

HERE IT IS, AS PROMISED.

YOUR INHERITOR AWAITS YOU IN HIS SANCTUM.

YES, I'M SURE HE DOES.

I LOOK FORWARD TO LEARNING MORE ABOUT HIS NEW ALLIES WH--

MAGUS! WHO'S YOUR FRIEND?

I...

I WOULD INTRODUCE YOU, BUT NAMES ARE POWER, AFTER ALL.

SUFFICE TO SAY HE HAS BEEN MY CONDUIT TO THE WORLD OF THE LIVING FOR SOME TIME NOW.

YOU'VE BEEN IN CONTACT WITH CIRESS AND YOU NEVER TOLD US?!

SO SORRY. I SUPPOSE I WAS A BIT PREOCCUPIED--

--JAMMING OUR MIND-LINK WITH GISELLE.

YOU WHAT?!

WE'LL DESTROY YOU FOR THIS!

WHERE IS SHE, MAGUS? WHERE'S GISELLE?!

THAT'S THE **BEST** PART. SHE'S ON A NETHER-PLANE OF CIRESS--A VERDANT DIMENSION THAT HAS BEEN **SEALED OFF** FROM THE UNIVERSAL ENERGIES.

ONCE HER PERSONAL STORES ARE EXHAUSTED, SHE'LL BE QUITE POWERLESS.

IMAGINE IT: A LAND WITHOUT MAGIC. THE MIND BOGGLES AT THE CONCEPT...!

YOUR **GLOATING** WILL BE YOUR **UNDOING!**

ONE THING I WON'T MISS ABOUT THIS PLACE IS THE **STINK** OF RIGHTEOUSNESS...

ENJOY THE REST OF YOUR STAY
VIP
HE'S...
HE'S FREE. MAY THE FATES HAVE MERCY ON CIRESS SHOULD HE REUNITE WITH THE DARK MAGI MASTER.
WHY IS IT WE STILL CANNOT SENSE GISELLE...?

SO IF THEY STEAL YOUR *KIDS*, WHY EXACTLY HAVEN'T YOU GONE AFTER THEM *BEFORE*?

I MEAN, IT LOOKS LIKE YOU HAVE ENOUGH *MUSCLE*...

THE MUD-HUNTERS HAVE... *SURPRISES*.

DO NOT THINK THEM WEAK. WE SEND RAIDERS BEFORE. NONE RETURN.

NOW, HAVE WE SURPRISE FOR THEM. NOW, HAVE WE *HOPE*.

NOW, HAVE WE *YOU*.

→*giggle*←... SAY THE SWEETEST THINGS, YOU DO.

OOOL?!

NYA OOOL...?

COUDA, BOBO! ALOONDA OOOL.

HROONK!

AIEEE!

MACHA! MACHA!

I'LL HANDLE THE *WARRIORS!* YOU JUST MAKE SURE YOUR *KIDS* ARE SAFE!

<FORWARD! THE GODDESS PROMISES *VICTORY!>*

ATOOK! COUDA ATOOK!

NE-AH ATOOK!

HARAKA! HARAKA!

ZUG-ZUG--!

KZIKK

<NOW! FINISH THEM OFF!>

ARIDA

KZAKK

<END THIS SCOURGE ONCE AND FOR ALL!>

<EXECUTE THEM!>

YAAAHH!

HEY, *WAIT* A MINUTE...

STOP! ISN'T IT *ENOUGH* THAT THEY'RE INCAPACITATED?

TAKE OUR *CHILDREN,* THEY HAVE! *NEVER AGAIN!*

SFX: SFX

Ah--!

WHAT'S THE *BIG IDEA?!* THIS IS SUPPOSED TO BE A *RESCUE,* NOT A *MASSACRE!*

MUD-HUNTERS, THEY ARE! *LESS* THAN US, THEY ARE! LESS THAN *PERSONS!*

"LESS THAN PERSONS"...?

I DON'T LIKE THE SOUND OF THAT...

ATOOK NYA POOKA! *COUDA ATOOK!*

'SCUSE ME, *"ATOOK"*...YOU *IN CHARGE* HERE...?

!

ALOONDA ATOOK? ZUG-ZUG...?

SORRY, BUT WE NEED A MEETING OF MINDS RIGHT NOW, AND I DON'T KNOW HOW TO ASK YOUR PERMISSION, SO...

...oh...

...oh, NO...

NO!

WHAT...WHAT DID YOU *DO* TO ME...?

TRADED THOUGHTS... *MEMORIES...*

YOU...YOU STOLE THOSE CHILDREN TO *SAVE* THEM..?

OF COURSE! WHAT DID YOU *THINK*-- WE WOULD *EAT* THEM..?

<SEAL THE TRAILS! LET NO ONE ESCAPE!>

SO! THE GREAT SACHEM OF VARDAN REE! I GUESS A LITTLE CHILD-SACRIFICE WASN'T WORTH *MENTIONING,* huh?

AND I THOUGHT YOU WERE SOOO *CUTE...!*

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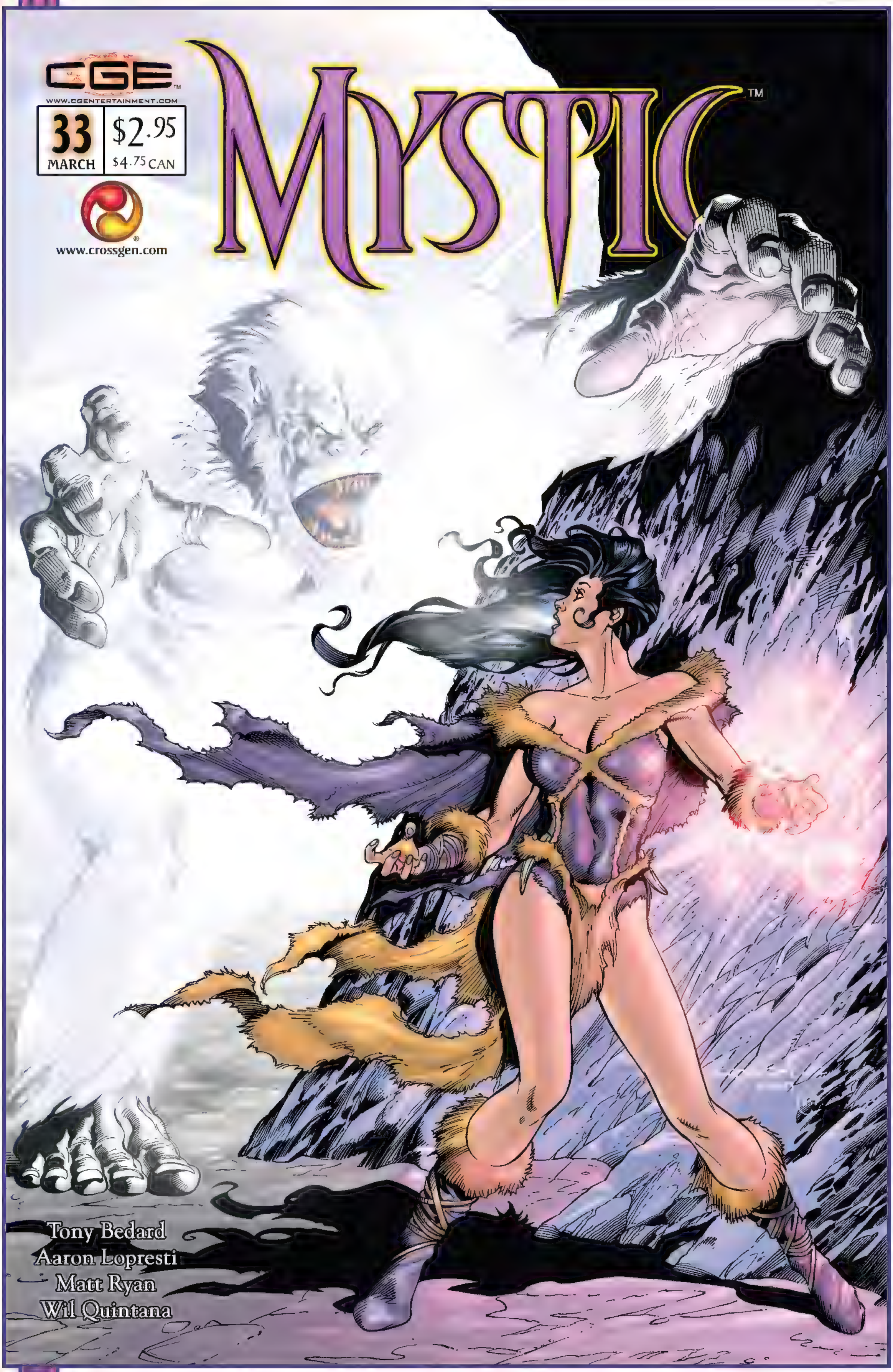

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A LITTLE ***TRICK*** I PICKED UP FROM THE ***SHAMAN GUILD***. THEY USUALLY USE IT ON ***WILD ANIMALS***--

--LIKE, IF A ***RABID CARNOCEROUS*** COMES CHARGING INTO ONE OF THEIR VILLAGES...

...BUT APPARENTLY IT WORKS JUST AS WELL ON A SILVER-TONGUED ***JUNGLE-JERK*** AND HIS PACK OF ***MURDERERS!***

GISELLE, PLEASE! ***MISUNDERSTAND,*** YOU DO!

Oh, ***REALLY?***

I GUESS I SHOULD'VE JUST ***GONE ALONG*** WITH IT ONCE YOUR MEN STARTED ***EXECUTING*** EVERY MAN, WOMAN, AND CHILD--

TOLD YOU, I DID: MUD-HUNTERS ARE ***NOT MEN!*** THEY ARE...SOMETHING ***LESS...***

LESS THAN THE PEOPLE OF VARDAN REE, WHO ***SACRIFICE*** THEIR OWN ***CHILDREN*** TO GODS THAT DON'T EVEN EXIST?!

THAT'S THE ***ONLY*** REASON THESE CAVEMEN SNATCHED YOUR CHILDREN: TO SAVE THEM FROM ***YOU!***

THAT'S RIGHT: I ***FOUND OUT*** YOUR DIRTY LITTLE SECRET. WHY I DIDN'T ***GLIMPSE*** IT WHEN WE MERGED CONSCIOUSNESS, I DON'T KNOW.

I GUESS IT JUST WASN'T ANY ***BIG DEAL*** TO --

--YOUUUUU...

GISELLE...?

<THE WITCH'S SPELL IS BROKEN!>

<LET US STRIKE BEFORE SHE CAN RECOVER!>

WH-WHAT HAPPENED TO MY *MAGIC?*

AND... WHY CAN'T I SUMMON *MORE...?*

<*FINISH OFF THE MUD-HUNTERS!* I'LL TAKE CARE OF OUR TURNCOAT GODDESS!>

=hkk=

KLUDD

=UNH!=

<NOW YOU WILL ANSWER TO MY "NONEXISTENT" GODS *IN PERSON!*>

FWEET

EEEEE EEEEE EEEEE

ARRHH!

GRAB A *WEAPON,* GISELLE! WE MUST ALL NOW *DEFEND* OURSELVES OR *FALL!*

Oh, *HEX!* I'D GIVE ANYTHING RIGHT NOW FOR A *SPELL-SPEAR* OR A *VORPAL SWORD!*

CHOMPF

SHRIIP

KRUNCH

UNH--

INCREDIBLE. I STILL CANNOT BELIEVE HE **ESCAPED.**

AND **LEFT** US HERE TO **LANGUISH**--

DON'T YOU MEAN TO **DIE,** JINAI? THE MAGUS DIDN'T LEAVE THIS BEAST BEHIND TO KEEP US **COMPANY...**

HOW COULD THE MAGUS HAVE ARRANGED HIS ESCAPE WITHOUT ANY OF **US** CATCHING ON?

BECAUSE **DECEIT** AND **BETRAYAL** AREN'T JUST TOOLS TO THE DARK MAGI-- THEY'RE A **RELIGION.**

WE GREW **COMPLACENT,** STUCK TOGETHER LIKE THIS. WE LET OUR GUARD DOWN.

AND TO THINK I NEARLY SIDED WITH HIM **AGAINST** YOU. MY APOLOGIES FOR DOUBTING YOU, LeCAVALIER.

NEVER MIND **THAT!** CAN'T YOU FEEL IT? SOMETHING IS COMING!

SOMETHING **BIG!**

...FWASH

There you are! Where's Giselle?!

WE...DON'T KNOW.

OUR PSYCHIC LINK WITH HER HAS BEEN SEVERED. WE FEARED SHE MIGHT BE DEAD, OR...

YOU'D BE LIKELIER TO KNOW. SPEAKING OF WHICH, HOW DID YOU GET HERE?

YES. NO OFFENSE, BUT...AREN'T YOU JUST HER PET?

You've watched everything that's happened to Giselle since the moment you got sucked inside her, and you still don't have a clue what I am...?!

Probably just as well the kid ignored half your advice, anyway!

Say...looks like you're short one Dark Magi Spirit...

And what's with the roadkill?

THE MAGUS BROKE FREE OF THE SPIRIT PLANE A SHORT TIME AGO. THIS PLANES-STALKER DELIVERED A GATE, THEN GAVE ITS LIFE TO COVER HIS ESCAPE.

So he was in cahoots with someone on Ciress...

I THINK WE CAN ALL GUESS WHO. WHAT'S MORE, HE SAID THAT GISELLE WAS TRAPPED ON A NETHER-PLANE THAT HAS BEEN CUT OFF FROM THE UNIVERSAL ENERGIES.

No magic, huh? She won't last long without using up whatever reserves she had within her...

"...that is, if she hasn't **already** run dry."

WHAT *HAPPENED...?*

oOhhh...

Oh, NO... I'M SO SORRY, ***ATOOK***...

I SHOULD HAVE BEEN ABLE TO ***STOP*** THIS...

YOU WOULD HAVE ONLY DELAYED A RECKONING THAT WAS A LONG TIME COMING.

IT SADDENS ME THAT DIPLOMACY COULD NOT PREVAIL, BUT THE VARDANIANS REBUFFED ALL MY PREVIOUS OVERTURES.

WOW. YOU PICKED UP MY LANGUAGE EVEN BETTER THAN THE SACHEM DID!

OF COURSE. WE WERE NOT CURSED AS HIS PEOPLE WERE.

YOU MEAN ***CURSED*** AS A FIGURE OF SPEECH, RIGHT? BECAUSE WHERE I COME FROM THERE ***REALLY ARE*** CURSES--

HERE, AS WELL. ONCE, ***TRUE MAGIC*** FILLED THE SKY AND ABIDED IN THE FOREST. ONCE, OUR ***WITCH DOCTORS*** WIELDED GREAT POWER...

...AND THEY ***USED*** IT TO CREATE THE CITY OF VARDAN REE. BUT THE MYSTICAL FORCES WERE TAKEN FROM OUR WORLD SEVERAL YEARS AGO...

"ONE DAY, ***STRANGERS*** APPEARED.

"***POWERFUL*** STRANGERS, WHOSE MYSTICAL ARTS FAR OUTSTRIPPED OURS.

"FIRST, THEY *CURSED* SOME OF MY PEOPLE...

"...TRANSFORMING THEM INTO THE *HIDEOUS THROWBACKS* YOU ENCOUNTERED. *AH*...NO OFFENSE."

"NONE TAKEN."

"THEY DROVE US FROM OUR HOME, WHICH THEY WOULD SOON REDEDICATE TO THEIR NEW GODS...THEIR NEW MASTERS.

"BEFORE THE STRANGERS LEFT, THEIR LEADER *DID* SOMETHING..."

...SOMETHING THAT ***BLOCKED OUT*** ALL ELDRITCH ENERGIES. WE HAVE BEEN WITHOUT MAGIC EVER SINCE.

OCCASIONALLY, WE RAIDED VARDAN REE TO SAVE THEIR CHILDREN FROM THE SACRIFICIAL ALTAR.

AFTER ALL, THEY WERE ORIGINALLY OF MY PEOPLE...AND THE CHILDREN CANNOT HELP BEING ***UGLY*** ANY MORE THAN ***YOU*** CAN.

Uh-*huh*...

SOUNDS LIKE THE PEOPLE WHO CUT OFF YOUR MAGIC COME FROM CIRESS, THOUGH I'VE NEVER HEARD OF A GUILD ***CAPABLE*** OF SUCH A THING.

I'D LIKE TO GET ***BACK*** THERE AND FIND OUT FOR SURE. CAN ANYONE ***HELP*** ME? I'VE KIND OF RUN OUT OF MY OWN POWER...

I HAVE BEEN ***THINKING*** ABOUT THAT...

"...THERE IS A ***PLACE,*** UP ABOVE THE TREE LINE, NEAR THE SNOWY PEAKS OF THESE SACRED MOUNTAINS...

"...YOU WILL FIND A HIDDEN PASS BETWEEN THE TWIN SUMMITS OF MOUNT TOONDA. IT LEADS TO THE ANCIENT SHRINE OF ANDAR.

"I BELIEVE THE ANSWER TO YOUR DILEMMA AWAITS YOU THERE."

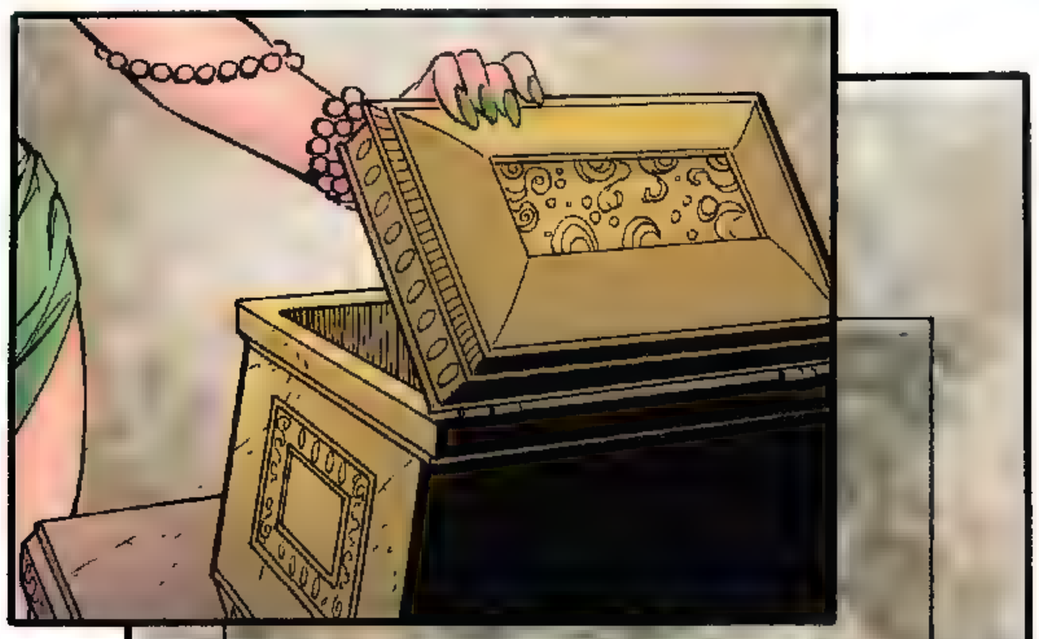
"WHAT EXACTLY WILL I ***FIND*** AT THIS SHRINE, ATOOK?"

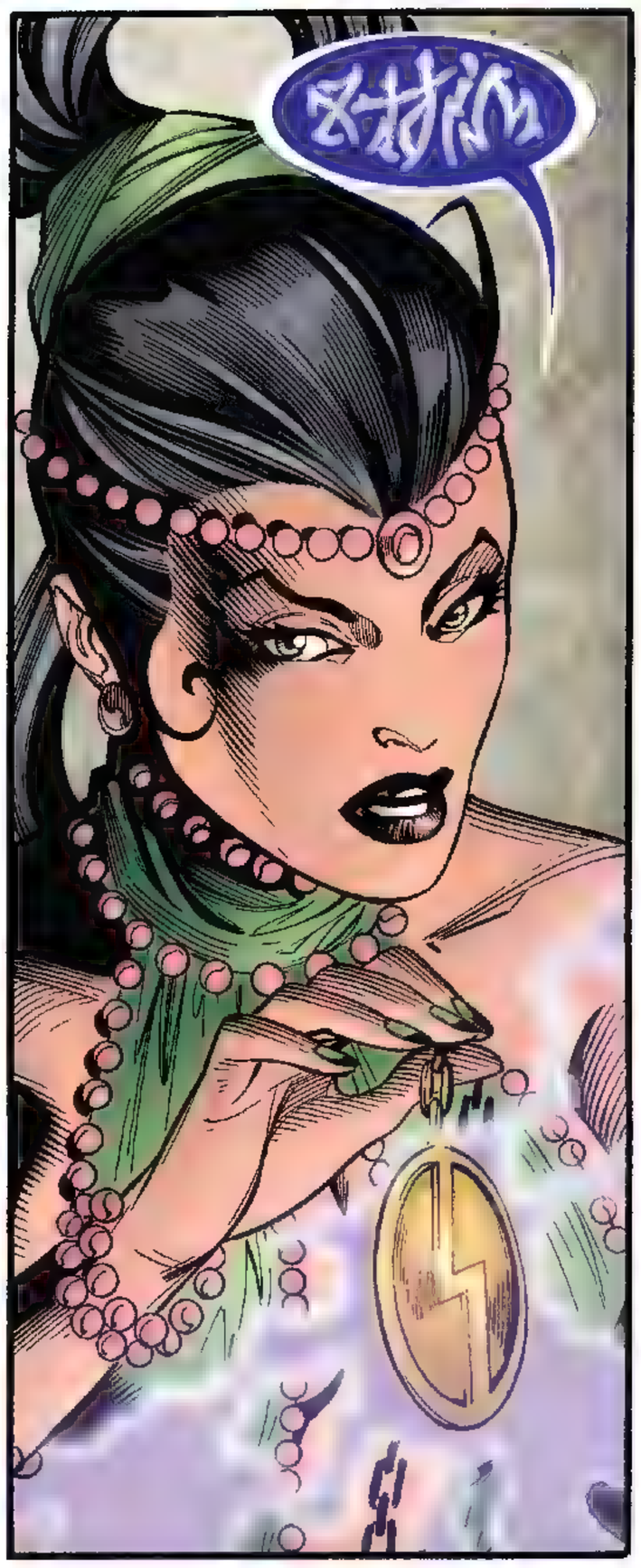
"ONLY WHAT YOU ***BRING*** WITH YOU."

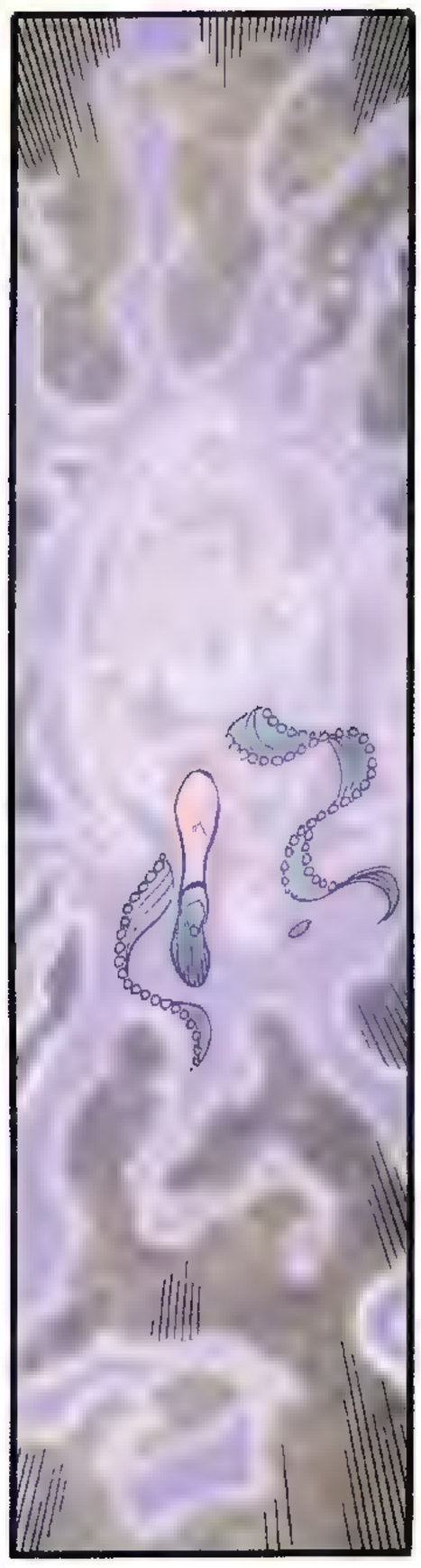
...THANK YOU FOR THE REPORT, BROTHER THUSIUS. THE ***TANTRIC GUILD*** OWES YOU MUCH FOR YOUR FAITHFUL SERVICE.

...NOW, PLEASE ***LEAVE*** ME, AND MAKE CERTAIN THIS CHAMBER REMAINS ***SEALED*** UNTIL I EMERGE. I MUST ***MEDITATE*** NOW.

AS YOU WISH, MASTER VASHUA.







ABOUT *TIME* YOU ARRIVED!

YOU WILL LEARN *NOT* TO KEEP HIM WAITING. NOW, *COME*...

WOULD IT HAVE *KILLED* YOU TO SAY, "*WELCOME*"?

THIS IS NOT AN *EASY* DECISION FOR ME, YOU KNOW...

YOU ALREADY *MADE* YOUR DECISION THE NIGHT YOU ALLOWED OUR MASTER'S *SUCCUBUS* TO PREY UPON YOUR ACOLYTES.

"*OUR*" MASTER...?

YES, VASHUA. WHETHER OR NOT YOU'VE EVEN BEEN *AWARE* OF IT, *I* HAVE BEEN PULLING *ALL* YOUR STRINGS FOR QUITE SOME TIME NOW...

YOU WILL FIND, AS THE MAGUS HAS, THAT ***KNOWINGLY*** SERVING THE ***GEOMETER GUILD*** IS MUCH MORE REWARDING...

...THAN BEING OUR UNWITTING ***PAWN.***

WELCOME TO THE WORLD'S ***TRUE*** INNER CIRCLE OF POWER.

GEOMETER GUILD...?! I'VE NEVER EVEN ***HEARD*** OF--

WITH ***GOOD REASON,*** VASHUA. THEY HAVE ***CONCEALED*** THEIR EXISTENCE SINCE BEFORE THE FIRST COMING OF ANIMORA.

SO THEY HAVE A TALENT FOR ***OBSCURITY.*** SHOULD I BE ***IMPRESSED?***

THE LAST FIVE CENTURIES OF HISTORY, THE GLOBAL BALANCE OF POWER, YOUR OWN RISE TO THE TOP OF THE TANTRIC GUILD...***ALL*** THESE THINGS WERE ENGINEERED BY ***US.***

MY RISE...?

THIS IS OUR ***LATEST*** MACHINATION...

⇒SKZZ⇐ ...TO NOUVEAU NEWSBREAK, I'M JEAN DuMONT. TONIGHT I HAVE A VERY SPECIAL REPORT...

...TONIGHT I WILL REVEAL TO YOU THE TRUE WHEREABOUTS OF THE ETERNAL SPIRITS OF THE SEVEN MAJOR GUILDS...

...AND THE IDENTITY OF THE GIRL WHO STOLE THEM!

...SO, WHAT'S THE BIG HONKIN' DEAL...?

VMMMM

Ah...

SO NOT *ALL* THE MAGIC IN THIS BACKWARDS PLACE IS TAPPED OUT...

HOWWWLLLLL

Oh-KAY... THE SHRINE OF ANDAR, I PRESUME...

Hrrr...?

OKAY...OKAY... KEEP IT TOGETHER, GIRL...

...ATOOK *CAN'T* HAVE SENT ME HERE TO DIE...

...MAYBE THIS IS JUST A *TEST* OF MY BRAVERY...

Ah-Toook?!

YAAAHHH!

PAP

UNGH

SHFF

SPUT

GYAHRRR!

SEVEN SPIRITS--! *NOW* I'VE DONE IT...

WELL, IF THIS IS *IT*...

YY

...THEN I'M GOIN' DOWN *SWINGING*...

KONK

Ohhh...

THAT... *HURT!*

YOU CAN *TALK...?!*

OF COURSE I CAN SPEAK. DID NOT ATOOK *TELL* YOU WHAT YOU WOULD *FIND* UP HERE?

...um...*SORTA*. HE SAID I'D FIND...

"*ONLY WHAT YOU BRING WITH YOU.*"

Oh, NO.

I REALLY SCREWED UP... DIDN'T I...?

I, uh... DID NOT COME ALL THIS WAY TO BRING YOU A *FIGHT*...

ANYHOW, YOU SCARED ME AT FIRST, BUT I'M OVER IT NOW. I HOPE YOU ***UNDERSTAND.***

WE JUST... THIS WAS JUST A ***BAD FIRST IMPRESSION.*** BUT SMART PEOPLE...***GOOD*** PEOPLE...CAN GET ***PAST*** THAT SORT OF THING...

...RIGHT...?

A ***NOBLE*** PRONOUNCEMENT, YOUNG LADY, IF NOT THE MOST ***ARTICULATE.***

COULD YOUR ***OBTUSE*** APPEARANCE BELIE SOME HIDDEN WISDOM?

AS ***IF!***

IF I WAS REALLY WISE, I'D HAVE FIGURED OUT ***QUICKER*** THAT IF THOSE BUTT-UGLY MUD-HUNTERS WERE ACTUALLY THE NEXT STEP UP, ***INTELLIGENCE***-WISE, FROM THE ***HOTTIES*** OF VARDAN REE...

...THEN SOMETHING THAT LOOKS LIKE ***YOU*** MUST BE THE ***SUPER-GENIUS*** OF THIS PLACE.

A TRIUMPH OF INDUCTIVE REASONING... THOUGH IT DOES CALL TO MIND THAT BEAUTY IS ***SUBJECTIVE...***

ATOOK DISPATCHED YOU HERE, KNOWING THAT I STAND GUARD OVER THE SOLE REMAINING REPOSITORY OF MAGIC IN THIS REALM.

MANY CENTURIES AGO, ANDAR ***HIMSELF*** ERECTED THIS SHRINE. NO ONE KNEW ***WHY,*** UNTIL THE STRANGERS ARRIVED AND PLUNGED US INTO A MYSTICAL ***DARK AGE.***

THE SHRINE SAVED ONE LAST ERG OF ARCANE ENERGY, THOUGH I AM STILL UNSURE WHAT ***GOOD*** IT DOES TO HAVE IT LOCKED AWAY WHERE NO ONE CAN ***USE*** IT...

ONE THING I ***DO*** KNOW: SHOULD THAT SPARK EVER BE EXHAUSTED, THEN ALL HOPE OF RESTORING MAGIC TO THE WORLD WILL BE ***LOST.***

WELL...IF I CAN'T ***RECHARGE*** MYSELF WITH WHAT'S IN THERE, THEN I'M ***ALREADY*** ONE OF THE HOPELESS.

SEE, I WAS HOPING IT WOULD BE ENOUGH TO OPEN A ***GATEWAY*** BACK HOME TO ***CIRESS.***

OF COURSE, IF I USED UP YOUR LAST SHRED OF MAGIC TO GET WHAT *I* WANT, THEN I WOULDN'T ***DESERVE*** IT IN THE FIRST PLACE, WOULD I?

"CIRESS," YOU SAY? ***ANDAR*** CAME FROM A REALM CALLED CIRESS... AS DID THE STRANGERS WHO CURSED US MORE RECENTLY.

IT SEEMS WE'VE BEEN VISITED BY YOUR PEOPLE MORE THAN ONCE. I ***WONDER...***

YOU MAY LACK THE REQUISITE POWER TO ***TRANSPORT*** YOURSELF BACK HOME, BUT WHAT ABOUT TRANSMITTING A ***DISTRESS CALL?***

I THINK WE MAY HAVE POWER TO SPARE FOR A SIMPLE BEACON...

OKAY... BUT ***WHO*** SHOULD I CONTACT?

DO NOT DIRECT YOUR CALL AT ANYONE IN PARTICULAR. JUST BROADCAST YOUR ***PLIGHT***-- YOUR ***DIRE NEED***-- ACROSS THE PLANES...

...AND YOUR ***MOST POWERFUL ALLY*** WILL HEAR YOUR SUMMONS...

SFFF SKZZ--

NOW, WE HAVE BUT TO WAIT.

Mm. HOW LONG DO YOU THINK THIS IS GOING TO--

ALL RIGHT...GO GET *HELP--!*

POP

Finally!

SKITTER?!

Um, MISTER SNOW-MONSTER...? YOU *DID* SAY "*MOST POWERFUL*"...?

Oh, ***MOST CERTAINLY.*** THOUGH, NEVER IN MY WILDEST DREAMS DID I DARE HOPE THAT YOU COUNTED AMONG YOUR ALLIES--

--THE GREAT AND POWERFUL ***ANDAR!***

YOU SET UP THIS SHRINE...?!

Ages ago. I'll explain later--

--cuz we gotta get you home right now!

POP

Hmm... HE COULD HAVE AT LEAST SAID "HELLO"...

SMASH

I might've never found you, sealed away like that.

BUT... WHERE WAS I?

A sub-stratum of Ciress. The Plane of Missing Links, if you wanna give it a name.

WHAT IN THE FOUR MOONS IS GOING ON HERE?!

Looks like the start of a riot, kid! Same thing's happening at every major Guild Cathedral on Ciress!

Your secret is out! Everyone knows you took the Guild Spirits, and they wanna bring down the Masters for covering it up!

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FWASH

Look what the **squit** dragged in...

GISELLE!

HOPE YOU GUYS WEREN'T TOO ***WORRIED*** ABOUT ME...

*WHEN WE **LOST CONTACT**, WE FEARED YOU WERE **DEAD**, BUT--*

*--WE HAD BEEN **DUPED** BY THE **DARK MAGI** SPIRIT...*

YEAH. ***SKITTER*** FILLED ME IN SOME.

THE ***MAGUS*** MUST'VE BEEN WORKING WITH WHOEVER IT WAS THAT ***BANISHED*** ME FROM CIRESS.

WAS ***THAT*** EVER WEIRD...A WORLD WITHOUT MAGIC...

ANYHOW, NOW THAT I'M BACK, THE ***FIRST*** ITEM OF BUSINESS IS TO SOAK UP SOME MYSTICAL ENERGY.

I'M GOING TO ***NEED*** IT TO STOP THE ***RIOTS*** I JUST SAW BACK HOME.

You got **that** right, kid.

Whoever we're up against planned your downfall a little **too** well...

They somehow **sealed off** an entire plane so that no one inside could access the universal energies...

...they got the Magus to cut off the other spirits' **mindlink** with you, so they couldn't help you out...

...and they got that **reporter** to tell the world that you took the **Guild Spirits** and that the Guilds covered it all **up.**

IT'S A P.R. ***DISASTER...***

*IS THIS A **NEW LOOK**, GISELLE? I APPROVE.*

THANKS, BUT I'M CHANGING IT BACK--FOR ***GENEVIEVE'S*** SAKE. SPEAKING OF WHICH, I SHOULD GO ***HELP*** HER...

GENEVIEVE VILLARD! WHY DID YOU LIE TO US?!

YOU'RE NO GUILD MASTER AT ALL! YOU'RE A FRAUD!

SHALL I HAVE SECURITY CLEAR THAT RABBLE FROM THE STREETS, MASTER VILLARD?

WHERE IS THE MASTER? THE TRUTH IS WHAT WE'RE AFTER!

WHERE IS THE MASTER? THE TRUTH IS WHAT WE'RE AFTER!

ABSOLUTELY NOT, JULIAN. THAT "RABBLE" HAS EVERY RIGHT TO FEEL BETRAYED BY US.

PERHAPS WE SHOULD HAVE MADE IT PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE THE MOMENT GISELLE ABSORBED THE SPIRITS OUT OF EVERY GUILD MASTER.

BUT THEN YOU MIGHT NOT HAVE BEEN ACCEPTED AS MASTER OF THE NOUVEAU GUILD.

SINCE WHEN DID A BUNCH OF SPOOKS MEAN MORE THAN THE LIVING PEOPLE WHO ARE ACTUALLY IN CHARGE...?

THE ETERNAL SPIRITS MAY JUST SEEM LIKE THE TRAPPINGS OF OFFICE TO YOU, THIERRY, BUT THEY ARE MUCH MORE IMPORTANT THAN THAT.

THEY LEGITIMIZE OUR POWER.

PEOPLE IN ALL THE SEVEN GUILDS KNOW THAT EVEN IF THEIR GUILD MASTER *ISN'T* ESPECIALLY ADEPT...

...THEIR GUILD SPIRIT WILL PROVIDE HIM OR HER WITH THE *WISDOM* TO RULE EFFECTIVELY.

NOW I HAVE TO WIN BACK THAT BROKEN TRUST *MYSELF.*

GOOD PEOPLE, *LISTEN* TO ME! WE ONLY EVER KEPT THIS KNOWLEDGE FROM YOU TO *AVOID* THIS KIND OF UNREST!

REST ASSURED THAT THE NOUVEAU SPIRIT IS *SAFE* WITH MY SISTER, AND THAT SHE WILL *RETURN* HIM TO ME AS SOON AS WE FIGURE OUT *HOW!*

YOU *LIED* TO US!

WHY SHOULD WE BELIEVE YOU *NOW?!*

PLEASE! I—

WHAK

Oohh...

THE MASTER--!

CLEAR OUT THE MOB!

DON'T HOLD BACK!

...nnn... NO, WAIT...

...STOP IT... ALL OF YOU... YOU HAVE TO--

STOP!

MY SISTER IS *NOT* AT FAULT HERE!

IF YOU WANT TO RAISE A *FIST,* OR FIRE A *SPELL* AT SOMEBODY, LET IT BE *ME!*

EVERY ONE OF YOU BETTER JUST GO *HOME* RIGHT NOW!

I WILL *ANSWER* ALL OF THE ACCUSATIONS LEVELED AGAINST ME AND AGAINST THE GUILD MASTERS, AND I PROMISE YOU *WILL* BE SATISFIED WITH MY EXPLANATION!

UNTIL THEN, I'LL DEAL WITH ANYONE MAKING *TROUBLE* THE SAME WAY I'D DEAL WITH ANY CRIMINAL!

UNDERSTAND?

WHAT... WHAT *WILL* YOU TELL THEM...?

I HAVE NO IDEA.

MASTER YINMA! HE'S *COMING!*

PLEASE *FORGIVE* ME, MASTER, BUT THE ATTACK IS *IMMINENT!*

NOK NOK NOK

I HEARD YOU THE *FIRST* TIME, SISTER SIFAKA! NOW, GO HELP THE CATHEDRAL GUARDS UNTIL I JOIN YOU!

I AM TRYING TO *CONCLUDE* A VERY IMPORTANT CONFERENCE, AND YOUR INTERRUPTIONS *AREN'T HELPING!*

Y-YES, MASTER. SORRY...

SLAM

FORGIVE ME, BUT WE *ARE* UNDER ATTACK.

PRECISELY THE REASON I ***CONTACTED*** *YOU...*

ONCE THE **NEWS** BROKE THAT GISELLE VILLARD **STOLE** THE POWER OF THE **GUILD SPIRITS** FROM US, IT WAS INEVITABLE THAT YOUR NEMESIS WOULD RENEW HIS WAR UPON YOU.

YOUR **ACOLYTES** EXPECT YOU TO TURN HIM BACK AS EASILY AS YOU HAVE VANQUISHED HIM SO MANY TIMES BEFORE. THEY DO NOT UNDERSTAND JUST **HOW MUCH** POWER WE DRAW FROM OUR SPIRITS.

I WILL YET PREVAIL.

SO, DID YOU CALL TO RUB **SALT** IN MY WOUNDS...OR TO OFFER A **SOLUTION?**

THESE ARE **STRANGE TIMES,** YINMA. THE OLD STATUS QUO IS FOREVER SHATTERED. WE MUST LOOK TO **NEW ALLIES** IF WE ARE TO MAINTAIN OUR STATURE ON CIRESS.

THE **VILLARD** GIRL KNOWS THIS. SHE'S WASTED NO TIME IN FORMING **HER OWN** ALLIANCES.

TRUE. HER RECENT TRAVELS HAVE WON OVER THE **SHAMANS,** THE **ASTRALS,** THE **DJINNS...**

I, **TOO,** HAVE FOUND POWERFUL NEW ALLIES...THOUGH NONE YOU WOULD HAVE **HEARD** OF.

YOUR DISTRUST OF GISELLE APPROACHES MY OWN. PERHAPS YOU'D CARE TO **MEET** MY NEW PARTNERS AND **JOIN** US IN OPPOSING--

BOOM

I'M *INTRIGUED,* MAGUS, BUT WE'LL HAVE TO PICK THIS UP *LATER*-- I HAVE A CATHEDRAL TO PROTECT!

VERY WELL...

"...THE SOONER YOU RUN UP AGAINST THE *LIMIT* OF YOUR POWER, THE SOONER YOU'LL ACCEPT MY *OFFER.*"

STATUS?

HE'S THROUGH THE OUTER PERIMETER, AND NOW HE'S SCALING THE--

SHA

HO, YINMA! WHAT A *SURPRISE* TO FIND YOU ACTUALLY *FACING* US!

WE HEARD YOU *LOST* YOUR FIGHTING *SPIRIT!*

WAS THAT SUPPOSED TO BE A *JOKE,* YOU WRETCHED, TWISTED THING?

See what happens when ya don't let **boys** in your Guild?

Guys like **this** crash your party, cuz they think it's where all the **chicks** are.

WHERE DID *YOU* COME FROM?

HE CAME WITH *ME*.

OUR QUARREL IS WITH THE ***ENCHANTRESS GUILD***, NOT YOU, STRANGER.

YOU MAY WITHDRAW AND ***KEEP*** YOUR LIFE.

GEE, THAT'S MIGHTY ***SWEET*** OF YOU...BUT I HAVE BUSINESS OF ***MY OWN*** WITH MASTER YINMA...

...AND YOU ***KILLING*** HER WOULD PUT A REAL CRIMP IN IT, SO...

SKRAOOM

YOU WILL *BLEED* FOR THAT.

SHING

SHING

SHING

THIS IS *MY* FIGHT, USURPER, NOT--

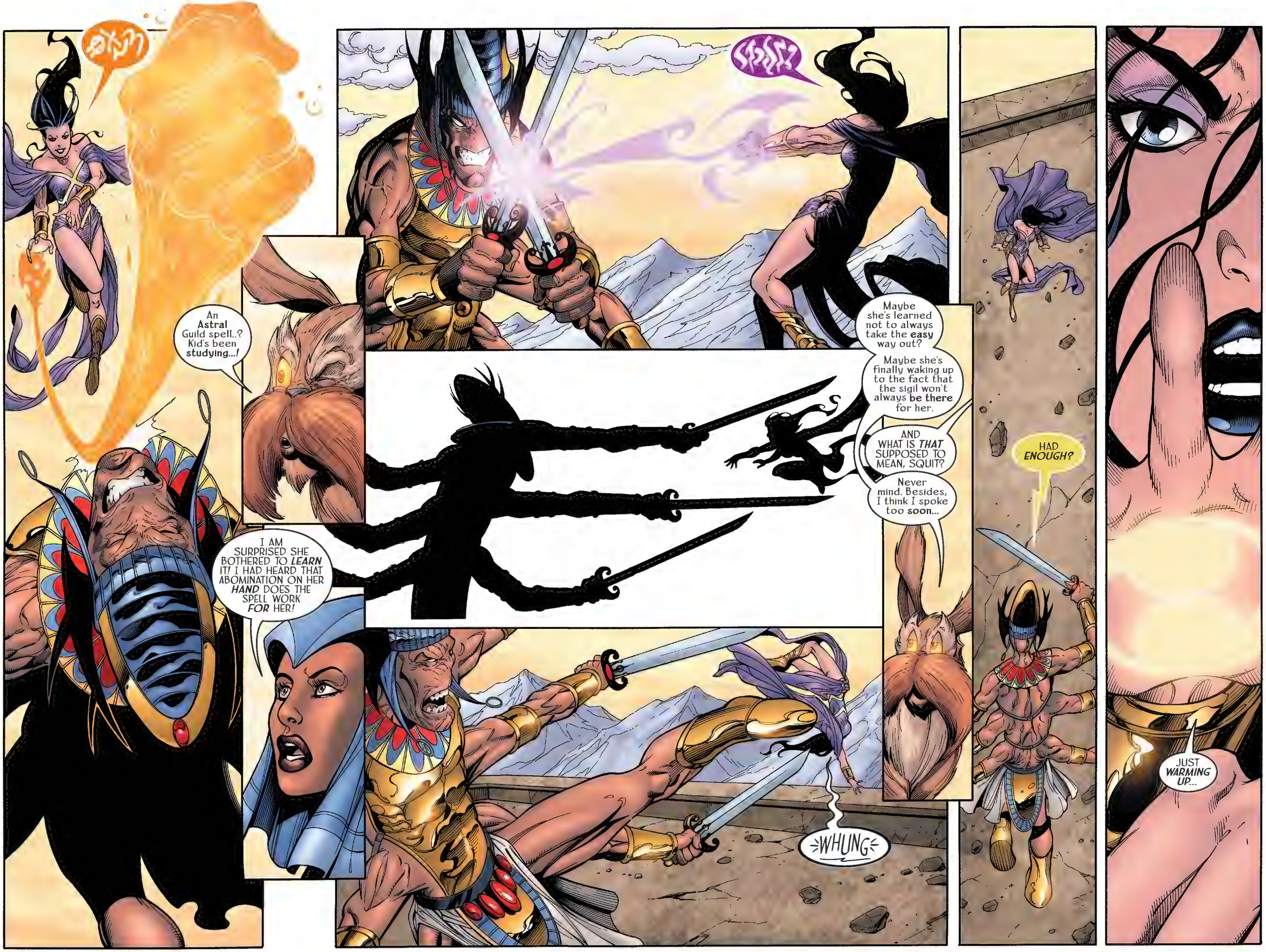
Just **hold your fire** for a second, Yinma...

...I'm sure the **Magus** won't mind if she gets herself **killed.**

YOU...*KNOW* HE CAME TO ME...?

So does Giselle.

Now **ask** yourself: would that skinny old bag of hate put **his** butt on the line for **you...?**


An Astral Guild spell..? Kid's been studying...!
I AM SURPRISED SHE BOTHERED TO LEARN IT! I HAD HEARD THAT ABOMINATION ON HER HAND DOES THE SPELL WORK FOR HER!
Maybe she's learned not to always take the easy way out?
Maybe she's finally waking up to the fact that the sigil won't always be there for her.
AND WHAT IS THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN, SQUIT?
Never mind. Besides, I think I spoke too soon...
WHUNG
HAD ENOUGH?
JUST WARMING UP...

GISELLE! NO! YOU MIGHT KILL HIM!

ENCHANTRESS SPIRIT..? IS THAT YOU?!

WHY DO YOU WANNA PROTECT THIS THING?!

I REALLY DO NOT WISH TO SAY...

...ONLY THAT YOU MUST SEND THE DEVASURA AWAY SOMEHOW WITHOUT KILLING HIM!

OKAY, I'LL--

OOWW!

SLISH

SORRY, "*DEVASURA*," YOUR TOYS HAVE GOTTA *GO!*

Ah--?

VERY *CLEVER,* GIRL!

BUT WE HAVE *OTHER* WAYS TO HURT YOU!

NOW, *TELL US,* GIRL, HOW YOU LEARNED OUR SECRET NAME.

WHO REVEALED TO YOU THAT WE ARE THE *DEVASURA?!*

I HAVE SEEN *ENOUGH!* SHE WILL ONLY MAKE THINGS *WORSE!*

Maybe... maybe **not.**

WHAT'S WITH ALL THIS *"WE"* STUFF?

IS THERE *MORE* THAN *ONE* OF YOU INSIDE THERE?

SHE IS *SMARTER* THAN SHE LOOKS, *ISN'T* SHE...?

⇒sigh⇐ She'd pretty much **haveta** be.

YOU KNOW THAT OLD JOKE ABOUT *"HOW MANY DEVASURAS DOES IT TAKE TO LIGHT A VOTIVE CANDLE"...?*

Wh-*WHAT?*

G-G-G-G...WH-WHAT-T ARE Y-YOU D-*DOING*-G-G...?

PROBING... RATTLING AROUND... LOOKING FOR A--

...O-KAYYY...

...NOW WHO IN THE FOUR MOONS *ARE* YOU GUYS...?

THIS IS WHY I DID NOT WANT YOU TO KILL THE DEVASURA...

THE DEVASURA IS...OUR ***HUSBAND.***

THE ENCHANTRESS SPIRIT TELLS ME YOU'RE ***MARRIED*** TO THESE GUYS...?

IN A MANNER OF SPEAKING.

AGES AGO, THE ENCHANT***MENT*** GUILD HAD BOTH WOMEN ***AND*** MEN IN IT. IN THOSE DAYS, A MASTER SPELL WAS DEVELOPED THAT COULD FUSE SPELLCASTERS TOGETHER, EXPONENTIALLY ***INCREASING*** THEIR POWER.

WE ***ENCHANTRESSES*** FOUND THE IDEA REPUGNANT, BUT THE PROMISE OF POWER WAS ***TOO MUCH*** FOR THE ENCHANTERS TO PASS UP.

THIS IS WHY YOU WILL FIND NO ***MALE*** PRACTITIONERS OF THE MYSTIC ARTS IN OUR LAND.

FOR MOST OF THE YEAR, THEY ALL RESIDE WITHIN THEIR COMMON BODY, THE ***DEVASURA.***

AND THIS *THING* THEY BECOME JUST HANGS AROUND YOUR LAND, *ATTACKING* YOU WHENEVER THE MOOD STRIKES?

YES. BUT IT IS *NOT* A BAD ARRANGEMENT. IT KEEPS *BOTH* SIDES OF THE CONFLICT *SHARP* AND STRONG.

ONE WEEK EACH YEAR, THEY *SEPARATE* THEIR UNION AND A TRUCE IS CALLED, FOR WE MUST *PROCREATE* IF WE ARE TO SURVIVE.

Glad ya didn't gloss over **that** little detail...

AND THE *REST* OF THE YEAR YOU FIGHT.

WELL, IT'S NOT THE *FIRST* MARRIAGE I'VE HEARD OF THAT WORKS THAT WAY...

I REGRET THAT YOU WERE CAUGHT UP IN OUR PRIVATE STRUGGLE.

IS THERE SOME WAY THAT ANY OF US CAN MAKE *AMENDS?*

IT IS ***SHE*** WHO SHOULD APOLOGIZE TO ***US!*** GISELLE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE WHOLE SORRY CIRCUMSTANCE THAT ***PROMPTED*** YOUR ATTACK TODAY!

ALL YESTERDAY AND THROUGHOUT THE MORNING, THE MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS OF MY LAND ***PICKETED*** OUTSIDE MY CATHEDRAL WALLS, DEMANDING MY ***RESIGNATION!***

ALL BECAUSE THAT THRICE-DAMNED ***REPORTER*** ANNOUNCED TO THE ***WORLD*** THAT YOU STOLE AWAY THE GUILD SPIRITS!

WHY WOULD YOU REVEAL SUCH A THING TO A ***REPORTER,*** OF ALL PEOPLE, WHEN WE ***AGREED*** TO KEEP IT A ***SECRET?!***

THAT'S JUST IT, MASTER YINMA--I ***DIDN'T*** TELL HIM A THING.

SOMEBODY ***SET US UP.*** I CAME TO FIND OUT IF IT WAS ***YOU.***

YOU THINK ***I*** WOULD COURT SUCH A ***DISASTER?***

NO. NOT REALLY.

BUT I HAD TO ***RULE YOU OUT*** BEFORE TAKING IT UP WITH THE ***OTHER TWO*** GUILD MASTERS I NEVER SAW EYE TO EYE WITH.

NOW IT'S TIME TO VISIT THE MOST ***OBVIOUS*** CANDIDATE FOR CAUSING OUR TROUBLES...

TREAD ***CAREFULLY,*** GISELLE VILLARD! THE ***DARK MAGI*** DO NOT WELCOME UNANNOUNCED VISITORS!

THANKS, MASTER YINMA, BUT IT'S NOT ***ME*** WHO SHOULD WORRY...

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THE PLANES-STALKER COULD HAVE **WARNED** ME I'D BE TAKING THE **LONG** WAY HOME...

PERHAPS THIS WAS A **NECESSARY** DETOUR, THAT NO RIVAL MIGHT SENSE MY RETURN...

KZAKK

BEGONE, PESTS!

SHRAKT

STILL, ANY **MORE** TIME WASTED IN THE SUBTLE PLANES, AND I MAY RETURN **TOO LATE**...

"...THERE'S NO TELLING WHAT **NEW DANGERS** HAVE CHALLENGED MY SUCCESSOR SINCE I'VE BEEN AWAY..."

HIS AGE IS COMING TO AN ***END*** AND HE DOESN'T EVEN ***REALIZE*** IT!

THE IRON-FISTED RULE OF THE DARK MAGI ***CANNOT*** PREVAIL AGAINST FREE HEARTS AND MINDS!

SURELY SOME OF YOU MUST SENSE THE ***TRUTH*** OF MY WORDS! ***SURELY*** SOME OF YOU WILL RISE UP AND CAST OFF THE YOKE OF ***OPPRESSION!***

YOUR CRYSTAL BALLS AND MAGIC MIRRORS ONLY BROADCAST WHAT THE ***DARK MAGI*** WANT YOU TO KNOW! EVEN YOUR ***SCRYNET*** ACCESS IS DENIED!

BUT ***SOME*** OF YOU MUST HAVE HEARD ***RUMORS*** OF WHAT IS NOW COMMON KNOWLEDGE IN THE ***OTHER*** GUILD LANDS!

...THE ***ETERNAL SPIRITS*** OF ALL SEVEN MAJOR GUILDS HAVE BEEN ***STOLEN!***

THE GUILD MASTERS CONSPIRED TO ***KEEP*** THIS KNOWLEDGE ***FROM*** US, BUT IT GOT OUT ANYWAY!

DO YOU ***UNDERSTAND*** WHAT I AM ***SAYING?!*** WITHOUT HIS GUILD SPIRIT TO GUIDE HIM, THE MAGUS IS ***VULNERABLE!***

HE HIDES IN HIS CATHEDRAL ***AFRAID*** YOU'LL FIND OUT WHAT A ***FRAUD*** HE HAS BECOME! A BETTER TIME TO OVERTHROW HIM MAY ***NEVER*** COME AGAIN!

SHUT UP!

LOOK WHAT YOU BRING DOWN ON ***ALL*** OUR HEADS!

STAND WHERE YOU ARE! EVERYONE ON THIS BLOCK WILL BE SENT TO THE GULAG...

...EXCEPT FOR YOU!

YOU--OR AT LEAST PARTS OF YOU--WILL DECORATE OUR BORDER GATES AS A WARNING TO THOSE WHO SLANDER THE DARK MAGI!

PLEASE DON'T DO THIS. I HAVE NO WISH TO HURT YOU...

AFRAID YOU HAVE THAT KIND OF *BACKWARDS,* OUTLANDER.

PREPARE TO *FIRE.*

I'M *NO OUTLANDER...*

SHRAKATAKOOM

I HAVE *SERVED* THE GUILD AS YOU DO! I HAVE *WALKED* THE PATH OF *DARKNESS!*

AND I SAY TO YOU THERE IS A *BETTER* WAY!

I WALK THE PATH OF *RIGHTEOUSNESS* NOW!

VIRTUE IS MY *SHIELD!*

VORP

VORP

PURITY IS MY *SWORD!*

FWASH

I HOPE FOR YOUR SAKE YOU'RE PACKING MORE THAN JUST *PURITY* IN THAT SCABBARD...

PURITY IS A *DELICATE FLOWER,* ALL TOO EASILY GROUND TO PASTE BENEATH A *BOOT HEEL.*

TRUE, IT KEEPS GROWING *BACK...*

...BUT THAT ONLY GIVES YOU THE PLEASURE OF CRUSHING IT *ANEW...*

FAITH

AHH!

SKRAKT

UNGH

HOW... HOW DID YOU *DO* THAT..?

THIS IS ONLY THE *START,* MAGUS...

...A *NEW DAY* DAWNS, AND YOU WILL NOT BE HERE TO SEE IT!

WH--?!

Ah, *YESSS*...IN ALL THE EXCITEMENT, I'D QUITE *FORGOTTEN*--

--I'VE BEEN *EXPECTING* AN OLD FRIEND'S *RETURN!*

!

YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE SENT ME ON THE SCENIC ROUTE IF YOU NEEDED ME SO URGENTLY!

BE SILENT AND GET *IN* HERE--!

NOW, MY ARMORED UPSTART... ONCE MORE, WITH *FEELING*...

SHRAKA

KOOM

WELL...?!

BETTER.

TELL ME, SPIRIT, WHO *IS* THIS TROUBLE-MAKER? ***HOW*** CAN THIS ***CHAMPION*** OF THE ***RABBLE*** BEST MY PERSONAL GUARD AND MAKE A FOOL OF ***ME?***

*HIS KIND IS NOTHING **NEW**. STRIKE HIM DOWN, AND I WILL **ANSWER** YOUR QUESTIONS--BUT **NOT** BEFORE.*

THERE HAD BETTER BE A GOOD REASON FOR SUCH ***SECRECY,*** SPIRIT...

KEEP *RUNNING* AND I SHALL ONLY MAKE YOUR DEATH MORE *PAINFUL!*

Oh, YE GODS OF LIGHT AND LAW--

--DELIVER ME FROM DARKNESS!

KRASH

...⇒huff⇐...
...⇒huff⇐...

Okay, pal. You **want** some help? You **got** it.

A...*TALKING SQUIT...?*

Not exactly a "god of light and law"...but **close enough.** Come on...

YOU SHOULD HAVE *STOPPED* WHEN I-- *eh...?!*

SPIRIT! WHERE DID HE *GO?*

I AM NOT SURE. BUT REST ASSURED, HE WILL BE BACK.

HI. I'M *GISELLE*. AND *YOU* ARE...?

MY NAME IS *TANCRED*.

YOU ARE SISTER TO THE *NOUVEAU MASTER*, ARE YOU NOT?

YOU ARE THE ONE WHO STOLE THE *SEVEN SPIRITS*.

BEEN WATCHING THE *NEWS*, huh? ONLY THE STORY'S NOT QUITE *TRUE*...

I DIDN'T *STEAL* THE GUILD SPIRITS. THEY WERE *FORCED* ON ME...ALONG WITH *THIS* TACKY ACCESSORY...

AND RIGHT NOW, THERE'S ONLY *SIX* OF THEM KICKIN' AROUND INSIDE MY HEAD...

YES. I COULDN'T *HELP* BUT NOTICE THAT THE *DARK MAGI SPIRIT* HAS RETURNED TO THE MAGUS.

WELL, THAT WASN'T ***MY*** CHOICE. I'M JUST GLAD YOU WEREN'T ***KILLED***.

YOU SEEM TO BE THE ONLY PERSON AROUND HERE WILLING TO ***FIGHT*** THE DRIED-UP CREEP.

WHAT'S YOUR ***DEAL,*** ANYHOW? ARE YOU FROM SOME ***NEW GUILD*** THAT FIGHTS THE D.M.s?

YOU WERE...ONE OF ***THEM...?!***

I thought there were only **two kinds** of people in this country--the ones **wearing** the jackboots and the ones getting **stepped on** by them.

ACTUALLY... I ***AM*** FROM THE ..."D.M." GUILD ***MYSELF***...

...THOUGH I HAVE COME TO REALIZE THAT THE GUILD IS A TWISTED, MONSTROUS THING THAT MUST BE ***STOPPED***.

WE ARE NOT SO VERY DIFFERENT FROM ANYONE ***ELSE*** ON CIRESS. WE STILL HAVE ***HOPES*** AND ***DREAMS***. WE STILL LOVE OUR ***CHILDREN***...

PERHAPS IF YOU ***UNDERSTOOD*** US BETTER, YOU WOULD ***HELP*** ME TO FREE MY PEOPLE...

...IF ONLY I CAN ***EXPLAIN*** TO YOU WHO WE ***ARE***...

WHY DON'T YOU ***SHOW*** US WHILE YOU TALK...?

OURS IS A ***VAST,*** UNFORGIVING LAND, WITH A COLD ***BEAUTY*** THAT ELUDES MANY OUTSIDERS.

PERHAPS IT IS ***BECAUSE*** LIFE IS SO HARD HERE, BUT OUR MAGICKS HAVE ALWAYS REFLECTED OUR CRUEL CLIMATE AND SAVAGE ANCESTRY.

A CULTURE OF HUNTERS AND NOMADS BIRTHED A SYSTEM OF ***BLOOD SACRIFICE*** AND DARK ***SUMMONINGS*** AND ***NECROMANCY***--

--A POTENT DOCTRINE IN A LAND WHERE THE NIGHT CAN LAST FOR ***MONTHS.***

BUT A THAW ***DOES*** COME TO OUR VALLEYS.

MY PEOPLE'S ***STRENGTH*** IS THEIR SENSE OF COMMUNITY. THEY REAP THE ***REWARDS*** OF THEIR SHARED HARDSHIPS.

Well, whaddaya **know**... they're just like you and me, after **all**...

...'cept for those funny **hats**...

TELL ME, GISELLE, WHY DID *YOU* COME HERE?

TO FINALLY HAVE IT OUT WITH THE MAGUS.

I THINK HE'S BEHIND A LOT OF BAD STUFF THAT'S HAPPENED TO ME LATELY-- INCLUDING LEAKING MY SECRET TO *NOUVEAU NEWSBREAK* TO THROW EVERYTHING IN AN UPROAR.

IT MOST CERTAINLY *DID*. I HAVE TO ADMIT, I WONDER WHY FATE DEEMED YOU ***WORTHY*** OF SUCH POWER.

HONESTLY, I'M ***NOT***. BUT LATELY I'VE BEEN ***TRYING***.

BEFORE ALL THIS, I NEVER CARED TO LEARN MORE MAGIC THAN I ABSOLUTELY ***HAD*** TO.

SINCE THEN, I'VE ACTUALLY BEEN GOING FROM GUILD MASTER TO GUILD MASTER, TRYING TO ***UNDERSTAND*** WHAT IT IS THAT MAKES EACH GUILD ***SPECIAL*** AND ***UNIQUE***.

THE NOUVEAUS, SHAMANS, ASTRALS AND DJINNS ACCEPTED ME. THINGS WENT A BIT ***WORSE*** WITH THE TANTRICS. THEN ONE MORNING I WAKE UP IN SOME ***PREHISTORIC*** LAND WITH ***NO MAGIC--!***

SOMEONE DIDN'T WANT ME TO KEEP LEARNING AND WINNING OVER GUILD MASTER. I THINK IT'S THE MAGUS, AND I THINK HE'S FOUND SOME PRETTY POWERFUL NEW ***FRIENDS*** TO HELP HIM.

WELL, IF YOU WISH TO ASK HIM FOR YOURSELF, IT JUST SO HAPPENS THAT I KNOW A WAY *IN*...

I DON'T ***KNOW*** WHO HE IS! MY ***GUILD SPIRIT*** APPEARS TO HAVE SOME INKLING, BUT HE'S ***NOT SHARING*** WHAT HE KNOWS...

WELL, THIS RABBLE-ROUSER'S ***TIMING*** COULDN'T BE WORSE. MY SOURCES TELL ME THAT GISELLE VILLARD IS ON HER WAY TO PAY YOU A VISIT. IN FACT, SHE SHOULD ***BE THERE*** BY NOW.

SHE IS OUR PRIMARY CONCERN. WE CAN ILL AFFORD ***DISTRACTIONS*** AT THIS STAGE OF THE PLAN.

DARK MAGI SPIRIT, I ***KNOW*** YOU CAN HEAR ME! I WAS INSTRUMENTAL IN ***FREEING*** YOU FROM YOUR BONDAGE TO GISELLE.

NOW RETURN THE FAVOR AND TELL US WHAT YOU KNOW.

HE STILL REFUSES.

THEN I REGRET THAT I MUST ASK MORE ***FORCEFULLY.***

OUT, GHOST! TELL ME WHAT YOU KNOW OF THE UPSTART!

AAGH! WHAT TRICKERY IS THIS?!

ZOK

→GAAGH←... IT...IT IS A SECRET...FEW DARK MAGI... KNOW...

...EVERY DARK MAGI MASTER...IS TESTED...

"...A SECRET SECT OF OUR GUILD... TRAINS ONE OF OUR MOST PROMISING ACOLYTES...TO TURN AGAINST THE MAGUS...

"...THE MAGUS IS NEVER AWARE OF THIS...UNTIL AFTER HE FAILS OR PASSES THE TEST..."

"...I WAS TESTED IN THIS MANNER...AS WAS EVERY MASTER WHO CAME AFTER ME...

"...SOME SURVIVED... SOME FELL..."

...IT IS OUR WAY... OF ENSURING THAT OUR LEADER...IS STRONG...

...AND NOW YOU...HAVE RUINED THAT TEST...

SO THIS UPSTART IS A SELF-INFLICTED PROBLEM?

=unh=

AT ANY OTHER TIME, I'D FIND IT LAUGHABLE... BUT RIGHT NOW IT THREATENS MY PLAN.

ARCHEMUS, IF YOU EVER TRY SOMETHING LIKE THAT WITH ME AGAIN--

WELL, THIS IS A BIT DISAPPOINTING...

...I THOUGHT I'D HAVE TO WORK *HARDER* TO CATCH YOU SCHEMING WITH YOUR *NEW PARTNER*.

HOW DID YOU...?!

SECRET PASSAGE. APPARENTLY, THIS PLACE IS *RIDDLED* WITH 'EM... OR DIDN'T YOU KNOW ABOUT THAT ONE UNDER YOUR THRONE-THINGIE?

NO... I...

NO.

HOW DID *YOU*?

HE SHOWED ME.

I HAVE BEEN *WELL PREPARED* FOR THIS DAY, MAGUS.

GOOD THING, TOO, OR WE'D HAVE *HURT* SOME PEOPLE COMING IN THE HARD WAY. NOW, HOW ABOUT YOU TELL ME--

WHOA! HEY!

DIE, FIEND!

STASIS

ARCHEMUS! I AM OUTNUMBERED HERE...

DO NOT SPEAK MY NAME, FOOL! AND THIS IS NOT HOW I WILL ENGAGE THE MYSTIC!

I LEAVE YOU TO CLEAN UP YOUR OWN MESS...

NO! WAIT!

TANCRED, STOP IT!

I'M NOT OUT TO KILL ANYONE-- NOT EVEN HIM!

SORRY, GISELLE, BUT THIS MAY BE MY *ONLY* CHANCE FOR *JUSTICE!*

THAT *WAS* YOUR CHANCE! YOU'LL *NOT* GET ANOTHER!

SKITTER, WHY DO *ALL* THE MEN I MEET TURN OUT TO BE *PSYCHOS?*

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ZERO SUM!

MASTER...?

I FORECASTED *SIGNIFICANT RETURNS* FOR ALL INVOLVED WHEN I INITIATED OUR *UNION* WITH THE DARK MAGI GUILD, BUT *NOW*...

...NOW I FEAR THAT THE MAGUS SEES *ANY* ALLIANCE AS A *ZERO SUM* GAME.

ONE PARTY WINS *ALL*...ONE PARTY *LOSES*. A DANGEROUSLY NARROW-MINDED PARADIGM -- ONE THAT ENSURES *BETRAYAL*.

BUT, THEN, PERHAPS THE POINT IS ALREADY *MOOT*.

IF THE MAGUS CANNOT RESOLVE THE DIVISION WITHIN HIS *OWN* GUILD, I SHALL BE FORCED TO SUBTRACT HIM FROM OUR *GRAND EQUATION*.

DO YOU THINK THIS *UPSTART* FROM HIS OWN GUILD HAS A CHANCE OF *DEPOSING* THE MAGUS?

PERHAPS NOT ALONE, BUT WITH THE *VILLARD GIRL* AT HIS SIDE...?

THE MYSTIC IS AN *X-FACTOR*--SKEWING ALL RATIONAL PREDICTION...

THE *POWER* SHE WIELDS IS AN ORDER OF MAGNITUDE *BEYOND* THAT OF THE MAGUS.

YES, BUT SHE HARDLY *KNOWS* IT. AND THAT WILL BE HER DOWNFALL.

REMEMBER...

"...TO A *LEARNED* MAN, A *LEVER* IS A TOOL THAT CAN MOVE THE WORLD ITSELF. BUT IN THE HANDS OF A *DOLT*, IT IS MERELY A *STICK*."

YOU HAVE *TWISTED* THE DARK MAGI GUILD TO SERVE YOUR OWN *VANITY!*

YOUR TERM AS MAGUS IS *OVER!*

Oh, LET'S *DROP* THE RIGHTEOUS MUMMERY, SHALL WE? YOUR WHOLE MISSION IN LIFE IS JUST A *LIE* FED TO YOU BY *MY* UNDERLINGS TO TEST *MY* WORTHINESS. *UNDERSTAND?*

THIS IS NOT ABOUT *YOU*, NOR THE FUTURE OF THE *GUILD*. THIS IS ABOUT *ME*.

LIAR!

SMASH

TANCRED, LET ME *HELP!*

I thought you were having **second thoughts** about Sir Rants-alot.

HE'S A *GOOD MAN,* SKITTER. MAYBE THE *ONLY* GOOD MAN IN THE DARK MAGI LANDS.

NOW, I'VE *TAKEN* POWER FROM PEOPLE BEFORE. IF I CAN JUST MAKE THE JUICE FLOW THE *OTHER* WAY...

ah!

...GISELLE... YOU ARE A *TRUE* ALLY...

YOUR FRIENDSHIP WILL BE *REPAID* IN THE NEW ORDER!

ｷｷｷ

SHRAK!

WHUNG

GO NOW, TO YOUR *ETERNAL REWARD!*

NO, TANCRED.

WE MADE A *DEAL* BEFORE WE SNUCK IN HERE, AND BY THE SPIRITS, YOU'RE *STICKING TO IT!*

WHAT DEAL?

VERY WELL, HE IS *YOURS*. I HAVE *OTHER* MATTERS TO ATTEND TO NOW-- OTHER *ARRANGEMENTS* TO MAKE.

ANSWER ME! WHAT DEAL?

I AGREED TO LET HIM *DEPOSE* YOU AS LONG AS HE DIDN'T *KILL* YOU.

YOU *WHAT?!*

WHAT GIVES YOU THE *RIGHT* TO MAKE SUCH A DECISION?!

THE SAME THING THAT BACKED UP *YOUR* AUTHORITY: *POWER*.

YOU CAN STOP WITH THE *FIREWORKS*, BY THE WAY. I SAVED YOU SO WE COULD *TALK*, NOT FIGHT.

SKZZL

SKZZL

I HAVE *NOTHING* TO SAY TO YOU.

NO...I'D SAY YOU HAVE *PLENTY* TO EXPLAIN. AND SO DOES THE TUBBY GHOST HIDING *INSIDE* YOU.

Eh?

DON'T PLAY *DUMB*. EITHER WE GO TO THE *SPIRIT PLANE* TO CHAT WITH *HIM*, OR HE SHOWS HIS FACE *HERE*...

BUT I *NO LONGER* POSSESS THE--

IT'S NO USE, MAGUS. THE CAT'S OUT OF THE CAULDRON.

I AM SURPRISED, GISELLE VILLARD, THAT YOU ARE **ASKING** FOR ANSWERS INSTEAD OF TRYING TO **BLAST** THEM OUT OF US.

THERE'S A TIME FOR *THAT*, TOO. BUT RIGHT NOW, A LITTLE ***BRAINWORK*** IS IN ORDER...

A FEW DAYS AGO, I WOKE UP IN A PLACE WHERE THEY DIDN'T EVEN *HAVE* MAGIC.

I THINK ONE OF MY ENEMIES *SENT* ME THERE, THEN AIRED MY *DIRTY LAUNDRY* ON THE SCRYNET WHILE I WAS OUT OF THE WAY.

NOW, I KNOW *ANIMORA* IS LONG GONE, AND I SERIOUSLY DOUBT *DARROW* WOULD TRY MESSING WITH ME AGAIN--

--SO THAT LEAVES MY LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE *GUILD MASTERS*.

THERE'S *TWO* MASTERS I NEVER REALLY SAW EYE-TO-EYE WITH: THE *TANTRIC* MASTER AND *YOU*.

AND SINCE THE *DARK MAGI* SPIRIT SLIPPED AWAY FROM THE OTHERS WHILE ALL THIS WAS HAPPENING, IT'S PRETTY ***OBVIOUS*** WHO SET ME UP.

BUT THERE'S A ***BIG QUESTION*** HANGING OVER ALL OF THIS.

SEE, THE PREHISTORIC PLACE I GOT STRANDED IN WAS ***CUT OFF*** FROM THE UNIVERSAL ENERGIES WE USE TO SPIN ***SPELLS.***

I'VE NEVER HEARD OF ***ANYONE*** WHO COULD DO ***THAT.*** SO, TELL ME, MAGUS... WHO ***IS*** YOUR NEW PARTNER?

CONGRATULATIONS, GISELLE. I DIDN'T THINK YOU COULD COGITATE YOUR WAY THROUGH A ***CARD TRICK,*** MUCH LESS PIECE TOGETHER WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU.

NEVERTHELESS, I WOULD SOONER ***DIE*** THAN HELP A GIRL WHO THINKS SHE CAN CAST ***ME*** OUT OF OFFICE.

*MY SUCCESSOR HAS STRUCK A **DEVIL'S BARGAIN** WITH THE MASTER OF THE **GEOMETER GUILD.***

IDIOT! WHY DID YOU ***TELL*** HER?! WHOSE ***SIDE*** ARE YOU ***ON,*** ANYWAY?!

WE ALL MAKE ALLIANCES WE LATER REGRET, MAGUS. RIGHT NOW, WE MUST LEVEL WITH THE GIRL, BECAUSE WE HAVEN'T MUCH TIME!

WHAT'S A GEOMETER GUILD? I'VE NEVER HEARD OF THEM...

Listen to the ghost, Giselle. Something's got him, well... spooked.

YOU, TOO, MADE A DEVIL'S BARGAIN, GISELLE VILLARD. YOU HAVE ALLIED YOURSELF TO A LIVING WEAPON.

WE BRED YOUR FRIEND TANCRED TO TEST THE MAGUS. IT WAS TO BE AN EVEN BATTLE, BUT YOU TIPPED THOSE SCALES.

TANCRED WILL DESTROY THIS LAND IN HIS QUEST TO "SAVE" IT.

AW, C'MON...

TANCRED AND THE MAGUS MUST FIGHT IT OUT TO THE END. THAT IS HOW IT MUST BE.

Um...

I WOULD HAVE MY APPOINTED BOUT WITH TANCRED. DO NOT INTERFERE, AND I SHALL TELL YOU WHY I HAVE ALLIED MYSELF WITH THE GEOMETERS...

...AND WHY YOU SHOULD, AS WELL.

THIS IS AN AFFAIR OF STATE, GISELLE. YOU ARE INTERFERING WITH OUR SOVEREIGNTY AND OUR RIGHT TO SELF-GOVERNANCE.

WOULD YOU SADDLE YOUR SISTER WITH AN INTERNATIONAL CRISIS?

PASS.

I'M GONNA CHECK ON TANCRED. DON'T CAUSE TROUBLE... OR ELSE.

Kid, you can't just leave 'em to look after themselves--!

FWASH

ATTENTION, CITIZENS OF THE DARK MAGI LANDS...

NO! NOT SO SOON!

HE'S ACCESSED THE EMERGENCY BROADCAST GLYPH..

WHAT "NOT SO SOON?"

THE MAGUS HAS PROVEN **UNWORTHY**. I STRUCK HIM DOWN TODAY IN SINGLE COMBAT. I... TANCRED OF THE OBSIDIAN GUARD!

WHO...?

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN FIVE CENTURIES, THE MAGUS IS **IMPEACHED**.

WHAT IS HE *TALKING* ABOUT?

BY THE LAWS OF THE BLOOD COVENANT, I ASSUME THE MANTLE AS DARK MAGUS SUPREME!

LISTEN TO THE WORDS, MY COMRADES, AND *UNDERSTAND!*

THE MAGUS IS *NO MORE.*

LONG LIVE *THE MAGUS!*

...LONG LIVE THE MAGUS... THE MAGUS IS NO MORE...LONG LIVE THE MAGUS...

THE MAGUS IS NO MORE.. LONG LIVE THE MAGUS. .

THE MAGUS IS NO MORE...LONG LIVE THE MAGUS...

THE MAGUS IS NO MORE...LONG LIVE THE MAGUS...

WHAT JUST HAPPENED?

HIS SUCCESSION IS VALID. THE SPELL HE SPOKE MERELY CONFIRMED THAT FACT TO EVERY CITIZEN WHO HEARD IT.

MY PLACE IS WITH HIM NOW...

WAIT--!

GET BACK HERE!

DELAY HIM, GISELLE! I'LL CATCH UP TO YOU!

MAGUS--?! WHERE ARE YOU *GOING?*

I SHALL EXPLAIN *LATER*-- YOU JUST KEEP *AFTER HIM!*

THE MAGUS IS NO MORE.

YES! LONG LIVE THE MAGUS!

HOW AM I GOING TO *SNARE* THAT GHOST--?

How'd you do it the first time?

TO ME, SPIRIT. WE HAVE A LAND TO *REMAKE*...

BREATHE DEEP, AND--

SHRAKT

Ah!

HOLD IT RIGHT THERE, SPIRIT!

THE SIGIL DREW YOU INTO ME IN THE *FIRST* PLACE! I FIGURED IT MIGHT GRAB YOU *AGAIN*...

Er... Technically it was my idea...

GISELLE...? YOU WOULD *KEEP ME* FROM THE DARK THRONE?

DID WE NOT HAVE AN UNDERSTANDING? I AM GOING TO *TRANSFORM* THIS DARK AND BACKWARD NATION FOR THE *BETTER!*

AFTER, OF COURSE, I *PURGE* ALL THOSE IN THE GUILD WHO SUPPORTED THE LAST MAGUS.

THEY'LL ONLY GET IN THE WAY OF MY *IMPROVEMENTS*...

IN FACT, A SIMILAR *SANITATION* OF THE COMMON CITIZENS COULD CLEAR OUT ALL THE *"DEAD WOOD,"* SO TO SPEAK.

THERE WOULD BE NO STOPPING US AFTER THAT...

I WAS NOT *BORN* RIGHTEOUS, GISELLE. I STRENGTHENED MYSELF THROUGH YEARS OF SELF-IMPOSED *SACRIFICE*... SELF-DISCIPLINING... FASTING...

IMAGINE AN ENTIRE PEOPLE *UNITED* BY SUCH A LIFE! A FEW YEARS OF WAR AND FAMINE WILL BE A *TONIC* TO THIS *BOURGEOIS* NATION OF SOFT, COMPLACENT, SHOPKEEPERS!

BUT... THAT COULD COST *MILLIONS* OF LIVES...

THIS IS A PRICE WE FIND *ACCEPTABLE* IN THE DARK MAGI LANDS.

AS THE GREAT SPIRIT-MAGUS *HIMSELF* ONCE SAID: A "SINGLE DEATH IS A TRAGEDY, A MILLION DEATHS IS *HISTORY.*"

THAT...
IS...

THAT IS THE BIGGEST LOAD OF *GARBAGE* I'VE EVER *HEARD!* WHAT IS *WRONG* WITH YOU PEOPLE?!

TANCRED, I CAN'T LET THIS HAPPEN...

...*ESPECIALLY* SINCE I'M THE ONE WHO MESSED UP THE WHOLE SITUATION IN THE *FIRST* PLACE! I THREW IN WITH YOU BEFORE I HAD ANY *REAL* IDEA WHAT YOU WERE UP TO.

SOMEHOW, I HAVE TO *MAKE UP* FOR THAT MISTAKE.

MASTER TANCRED! I CAUGHT HIM TRYING TO ACCESS HIS PERSONAL *ARMORY!*

EXCELLENT *TIMING,* GUARD!

GISELLE, IT *IS* TRUE THAT YOU INTERFERED IN A GUILD MATTER. LET US *ERASE* ANY QUESTION OF THE OUTCOME WITH A *REMATCH* BETWEEN MYSELF AND THE MAGUS.

THIS TIME, OF COURSE-- TO THE *DEATH!*

IF I LET YOU DO THIS, YOU HAVE TO SWEAR YOU *WON'T* KILL HIM!

ARE YOU INSANE, OR JUST STUPID?! I *HAVE* TO KILL HIM! THAT'S WHAT *"TO THE DEATH"* MEANS!

SWEAR IT, OR YOU'RE OFF TO THE *DUNGEON!*

BY THE OATH OF ORDEAL...I, SANGRID OF WALACHIA... EIGHTY-SECOND MAGUS OF THE DARK MAGI GUILD...DO HEREBY SWEAR THAT ONCE I LAY TANCRED LOW... I SHALL NOT TAKE HIS LIFE.

IS THAT BINDING?

IT'S THE OATH OF ORDEAL, YOU TWIT! HE'LL SPEND ETERNITY IN TORMENT IF HE BREAKS THAT ONE.

THANK YOU, MAGUS. GOOD LUCK--

STOP! YOUR... WELL-WISHING SICKENS ME...

THIS TIME, THERE SHALL BE NO QUARTER GIVEN.

NONE IS DESIRED.

Thinx

FWOOSH

SHRINK

Hark

FWANG

YOU CANNOT ESCAPE YOUR DESTINY, MAGUS. YOU *MUST* FALL TODAY...

...→huff←...
...→huff←...

Oh, NO...

NOW--!

WHOOSH

WHOOSH

WHAT TRICKERY IS *THIS?*

HE'S ALL YOURS, MAGUS.

YOU SHOULD HAVE RELIED ON SPELLS *ALONE,* TANCRED.

YOU SHOULD HAVE LEFT YOUR *BLADE* OUT OF IT.

SNATCH

YOU MIGHT HAVE *BEATEN* ME THAT WAY!

⇒unh⇐

SSSK

BUT YOU FORGOT THE MOST BASIC FACT ABOUT OUR GUILD...

OURS IS THE MAGIC OF *BLOOD SACRIFICE.* YOU JUST HANDED ME THE TOOL OF YOUR OWN DESTRUCTION!

GREETINGS--
--FROM THE PLANE OF BEATINGS!
MAGUS! REMEMBER YOUR OATH!
YES, YES...I HAVEN'T FORGOTTEN!
THROOM

I *VOWED* NOT TO KILL YOU, TANCRED...

...AND SO I SHALL *NOT*.

VASHUA...

THE *TANTRIC* MASTER--?!

DID YOU EVEN ONCE LOOK AT MY *FACE*, GISELLE? OR WAS THE *UNIFORM* ALL YOU SAW?

LISTEN CLOSELY, TANCRED...

!

SSSSSSSLURRRRRRPPPP

Nasty!

=urp=

YOU SEE? I *CAN* KEEP A VOW...

HOW DID SHE *GET* HERE..?

I SUMMONED HER WHILE YOU CHASED THE SPIRIT IN *HERE*.

YOU DO NOT SEEM PLEASED TO SEE ME.

SO IT WAS *BOTH* OF YOU...!

YOU TWO JOINED FORCES... AND COOKED UP THIS WHOLE SCHEME TO GET *RID* OF ME...

ACTUALLY, THEY WORK FOR *ME* NOW.
SAY HELLO TO *MASTER ARCHEMUS,* DEAR...
...nng... gg...

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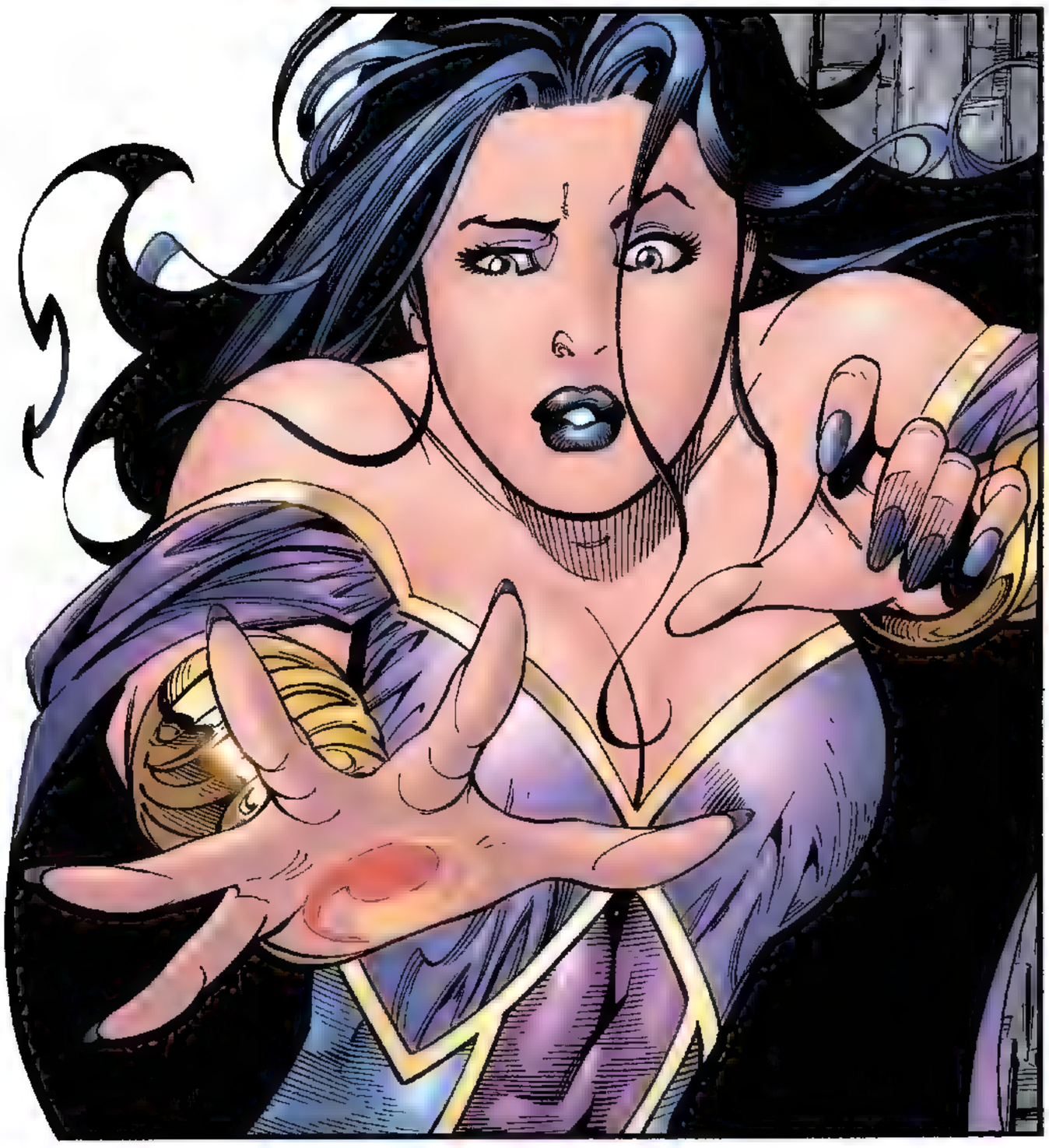

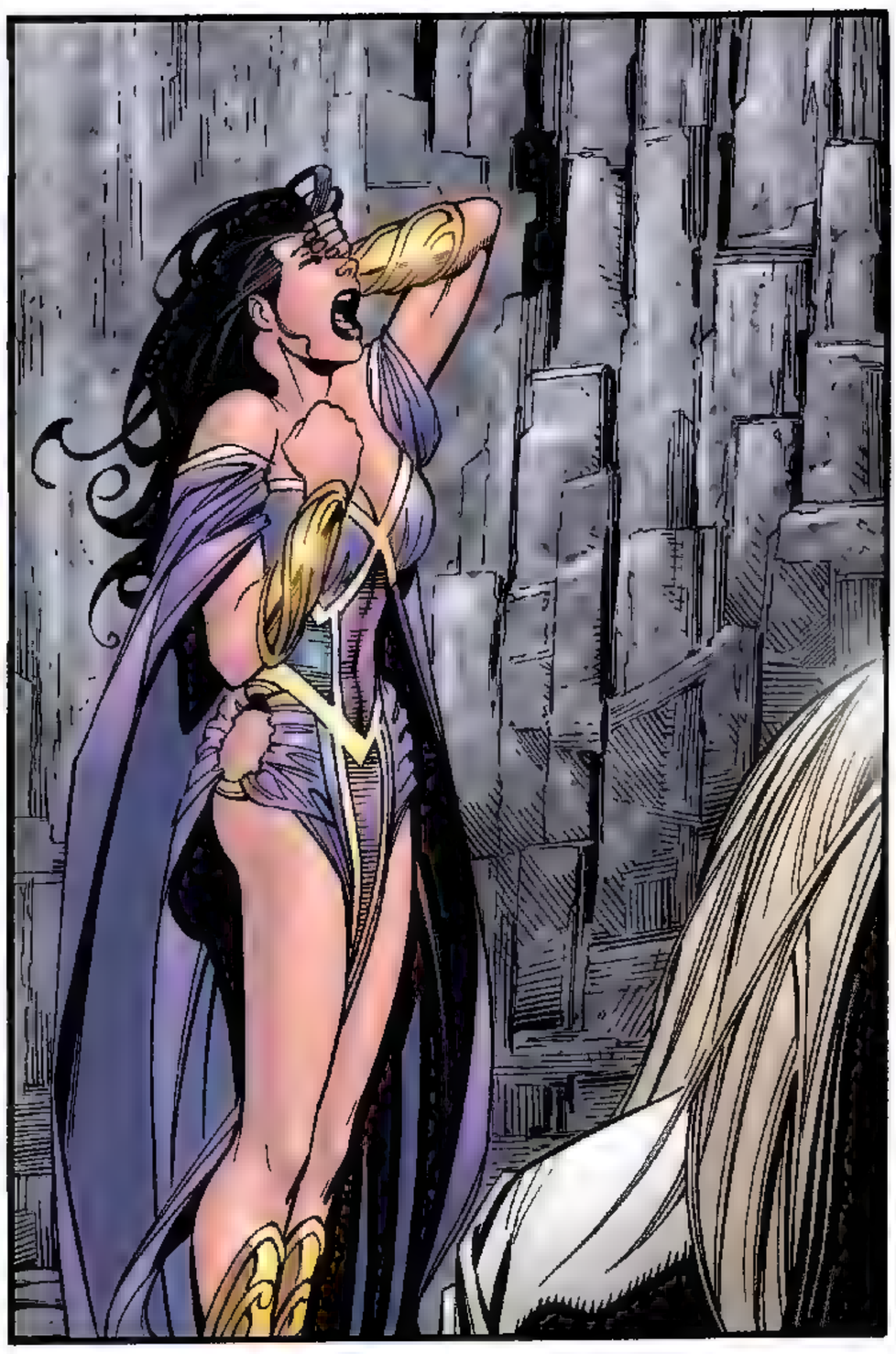

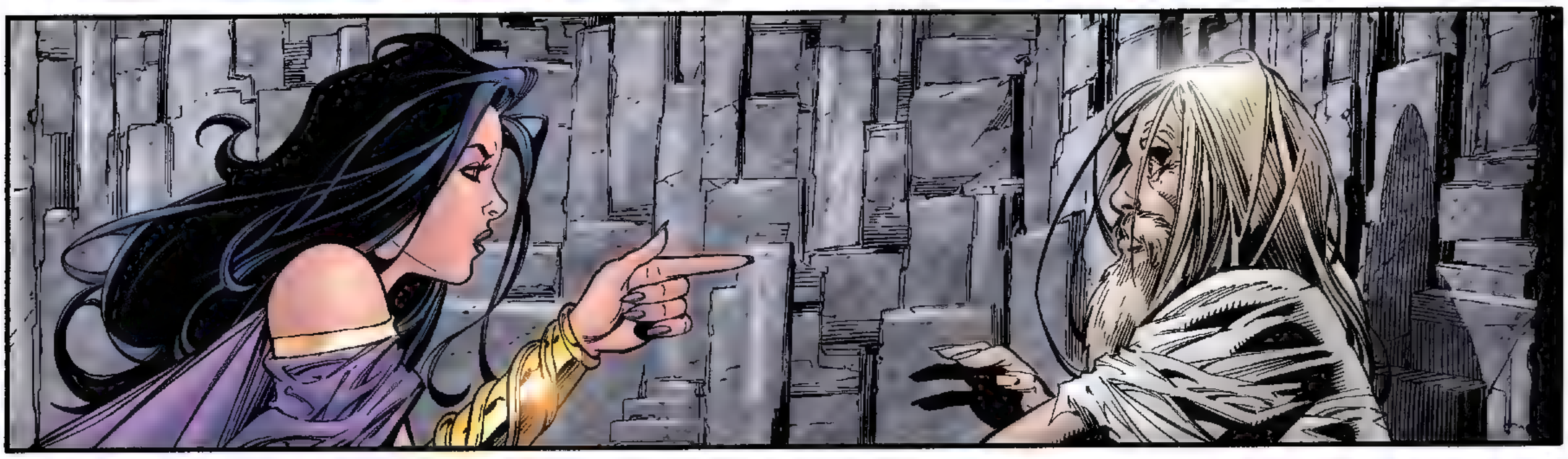

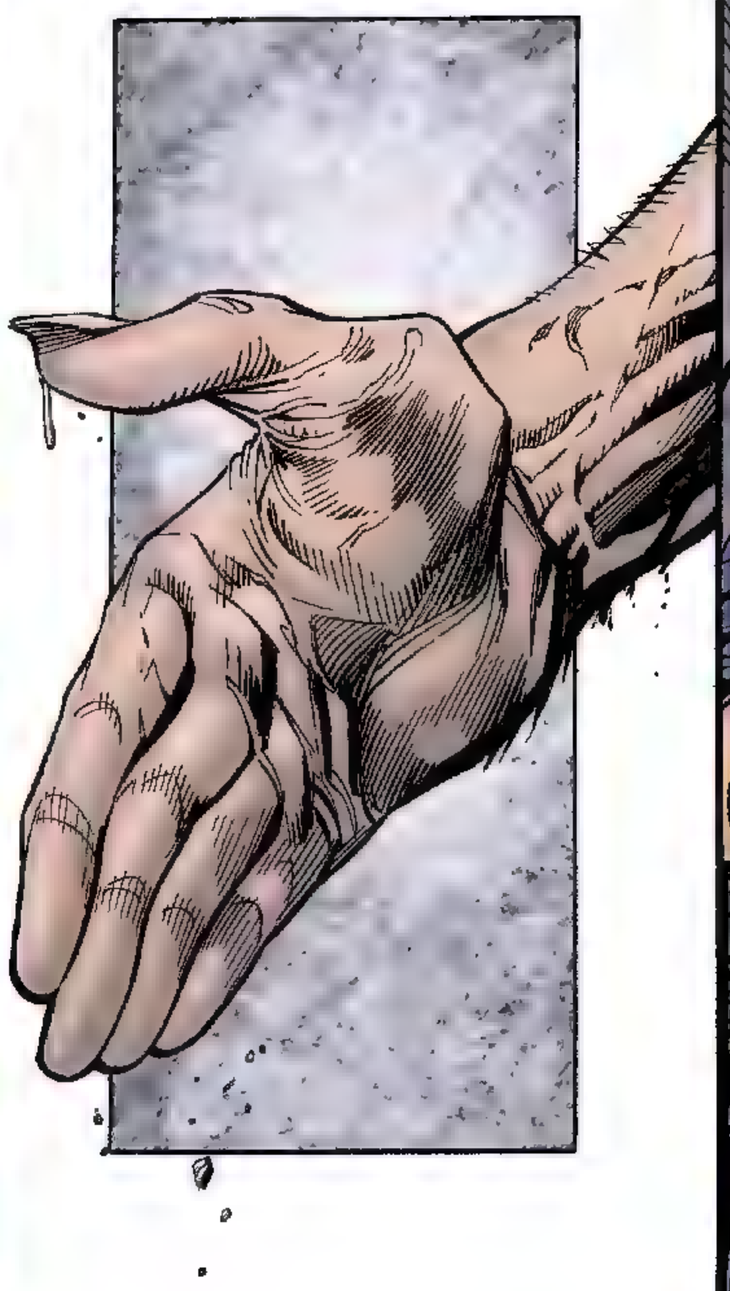

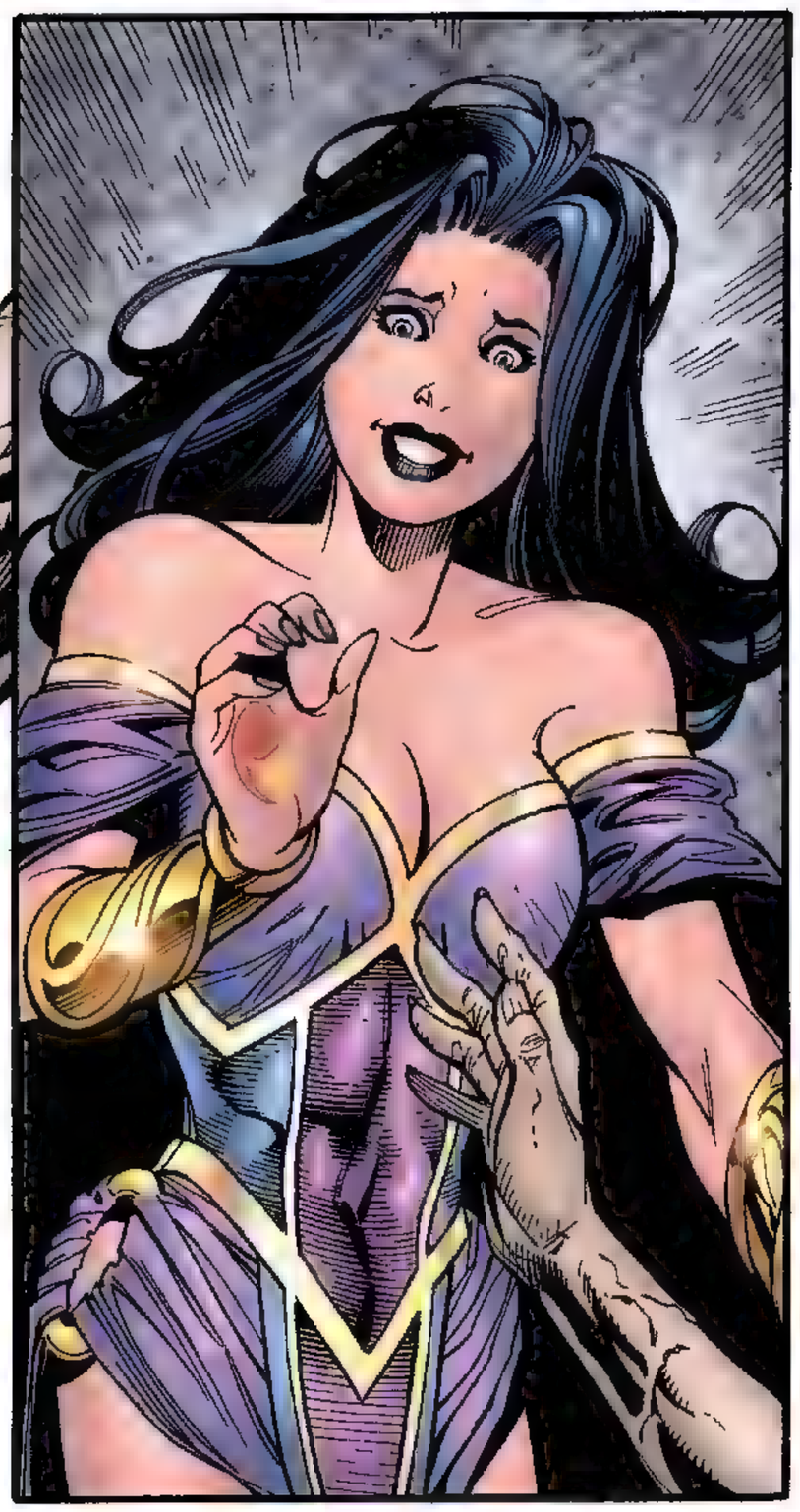

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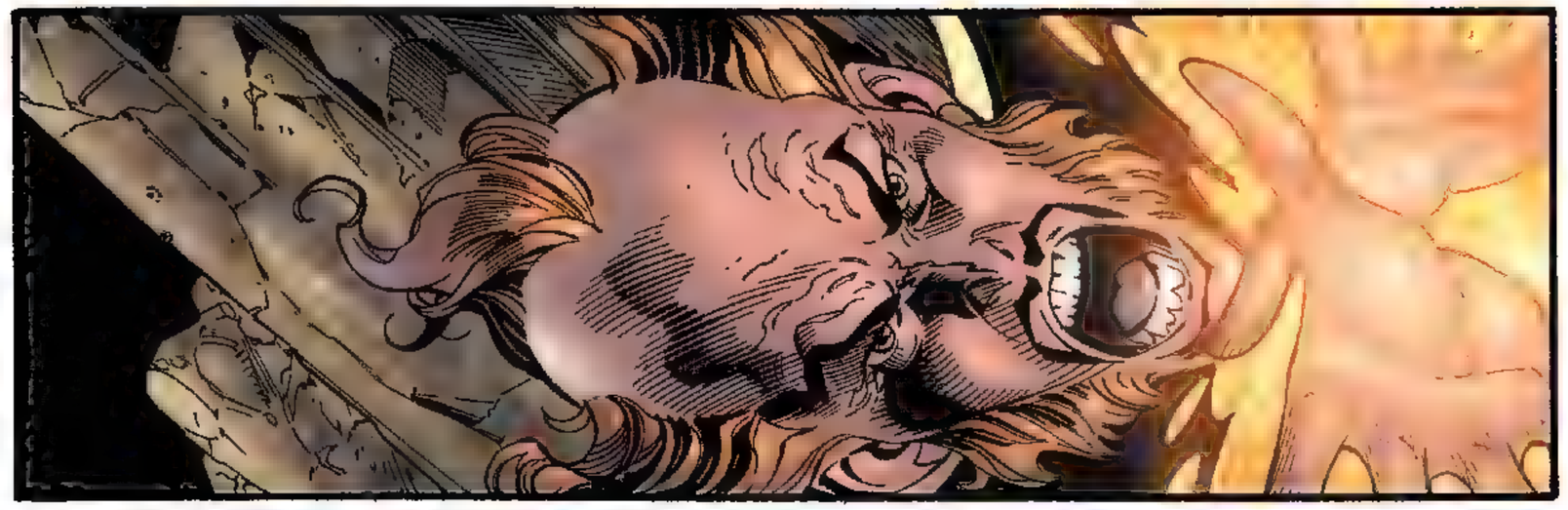

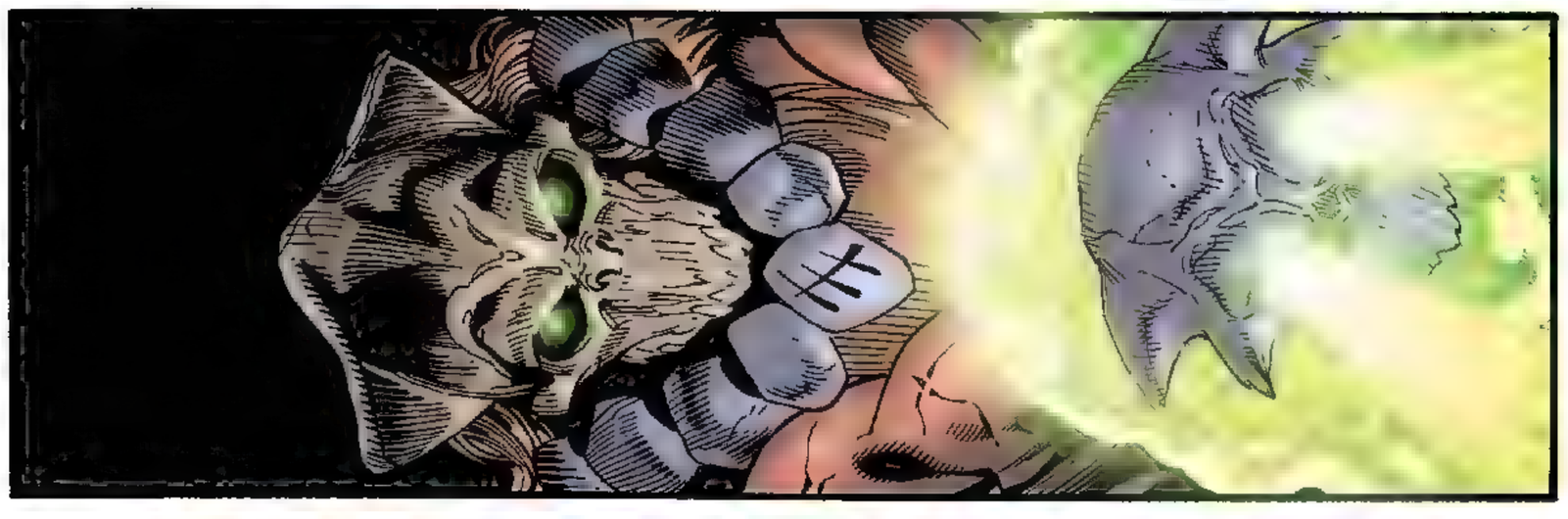

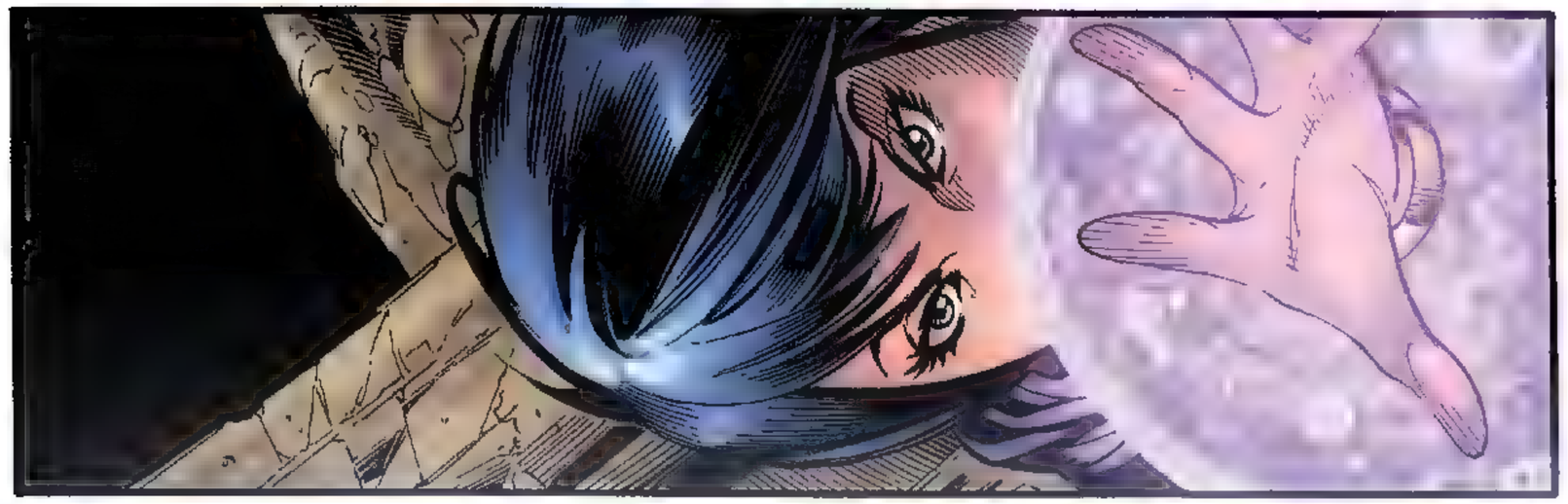

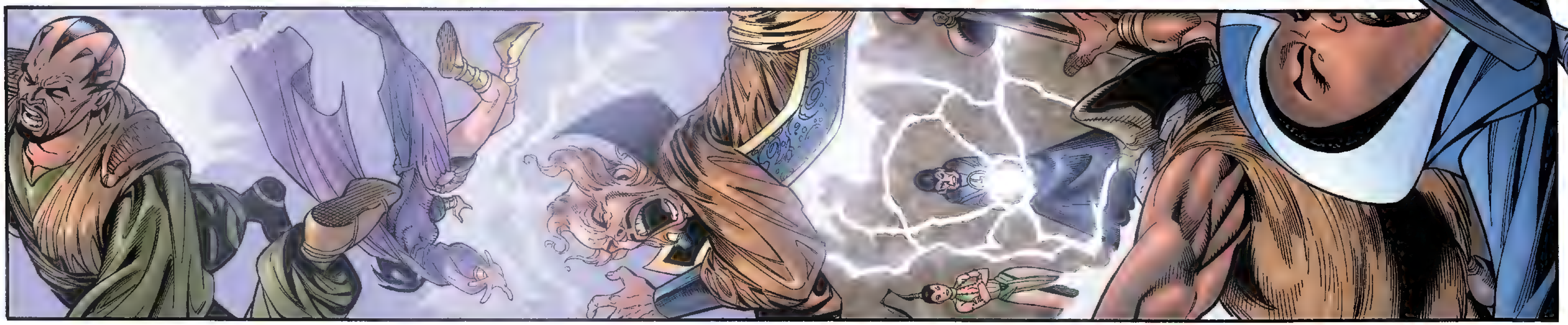

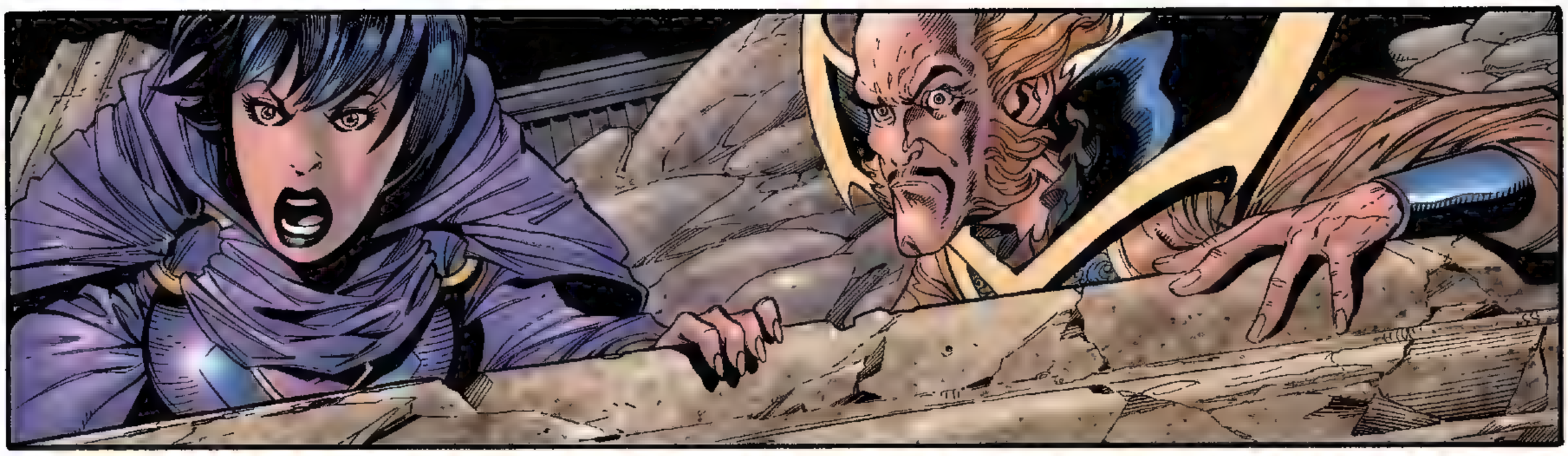

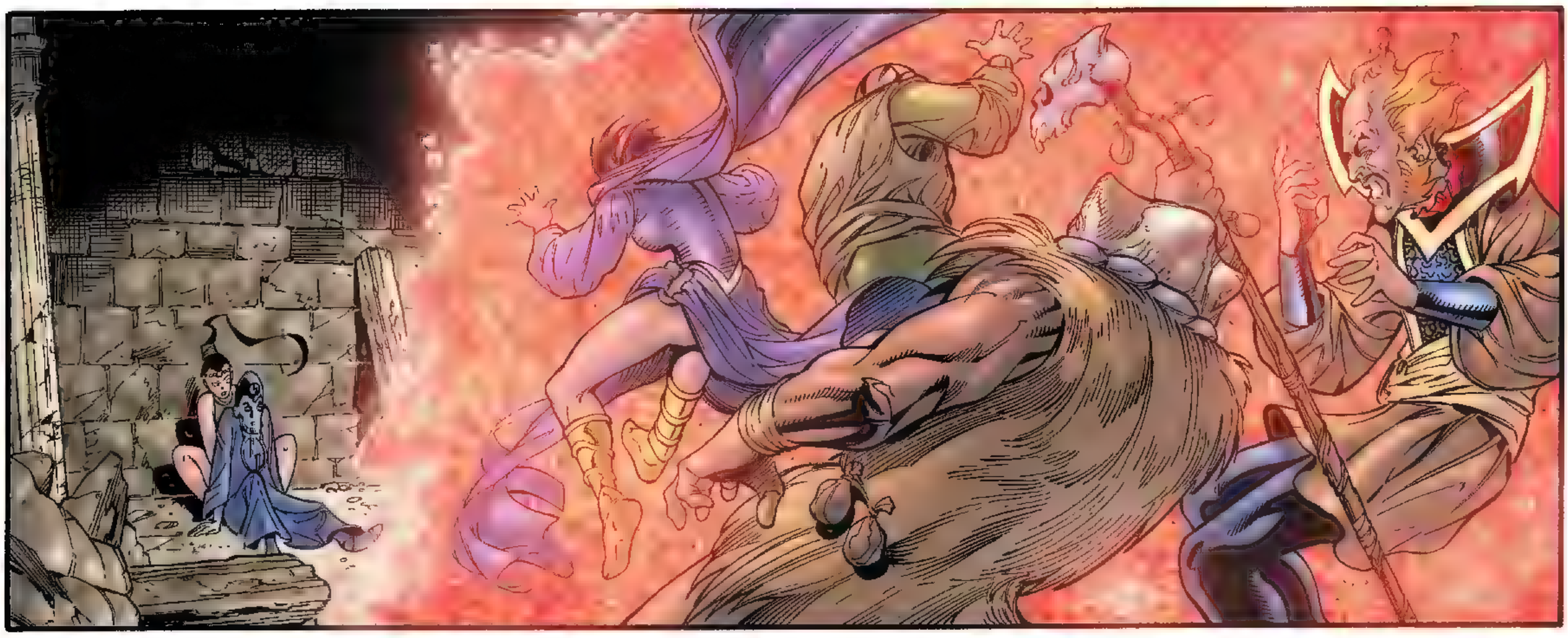

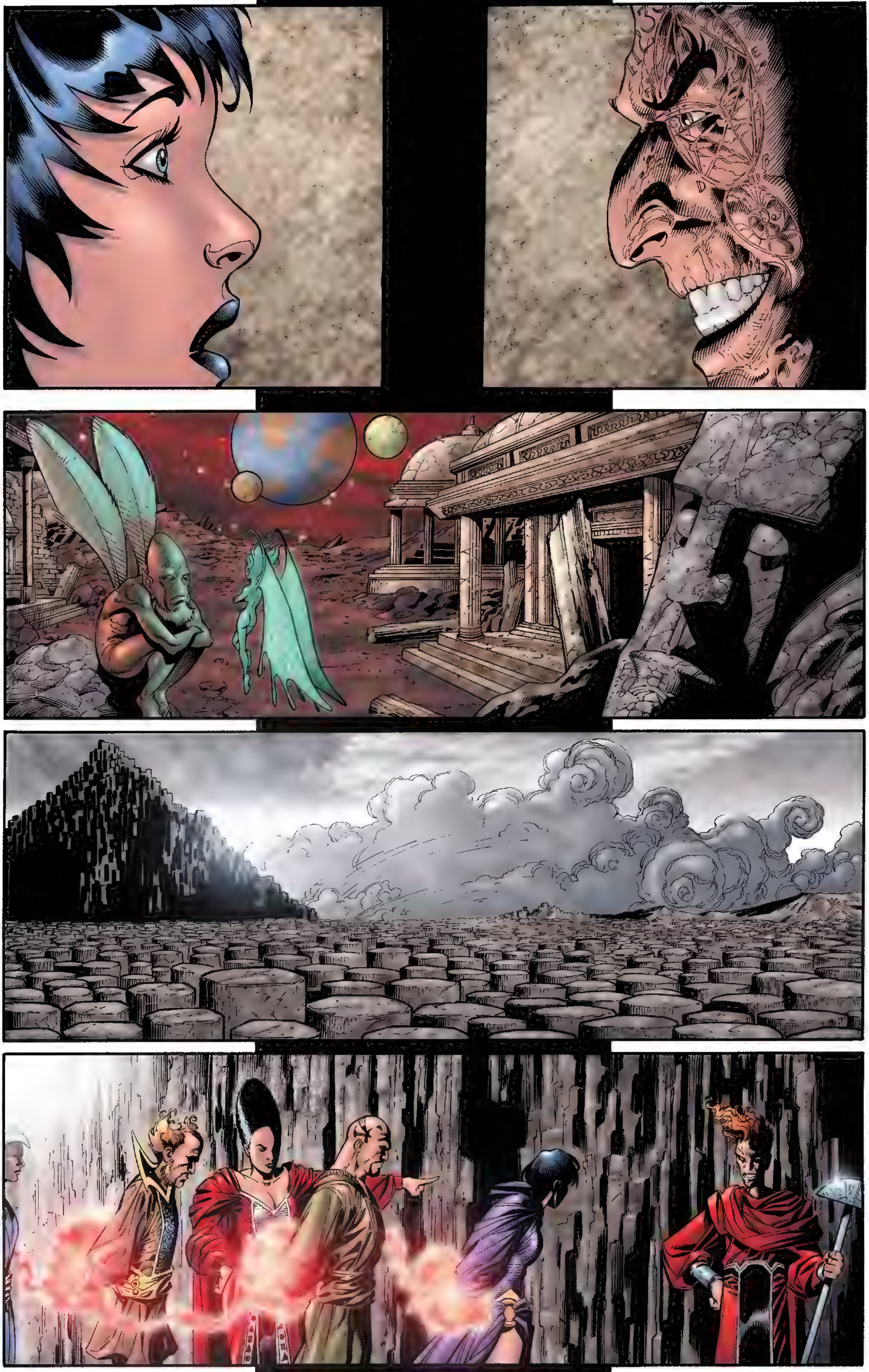

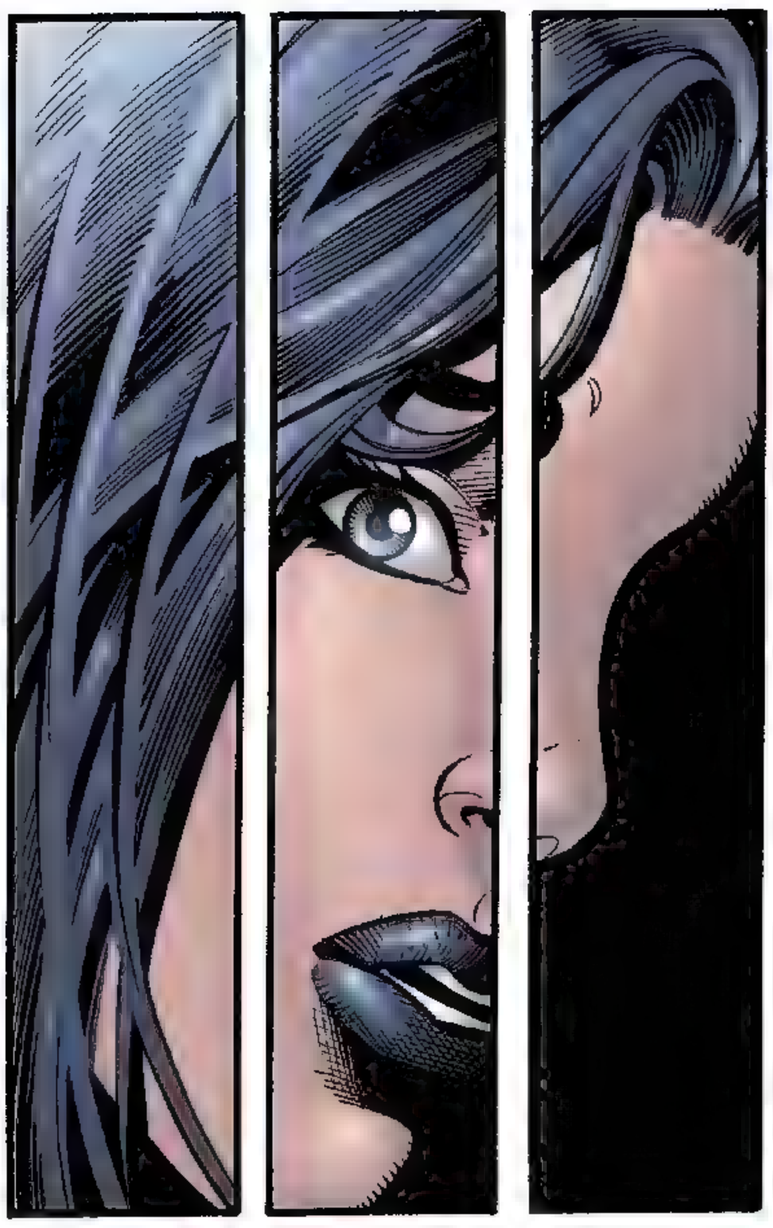

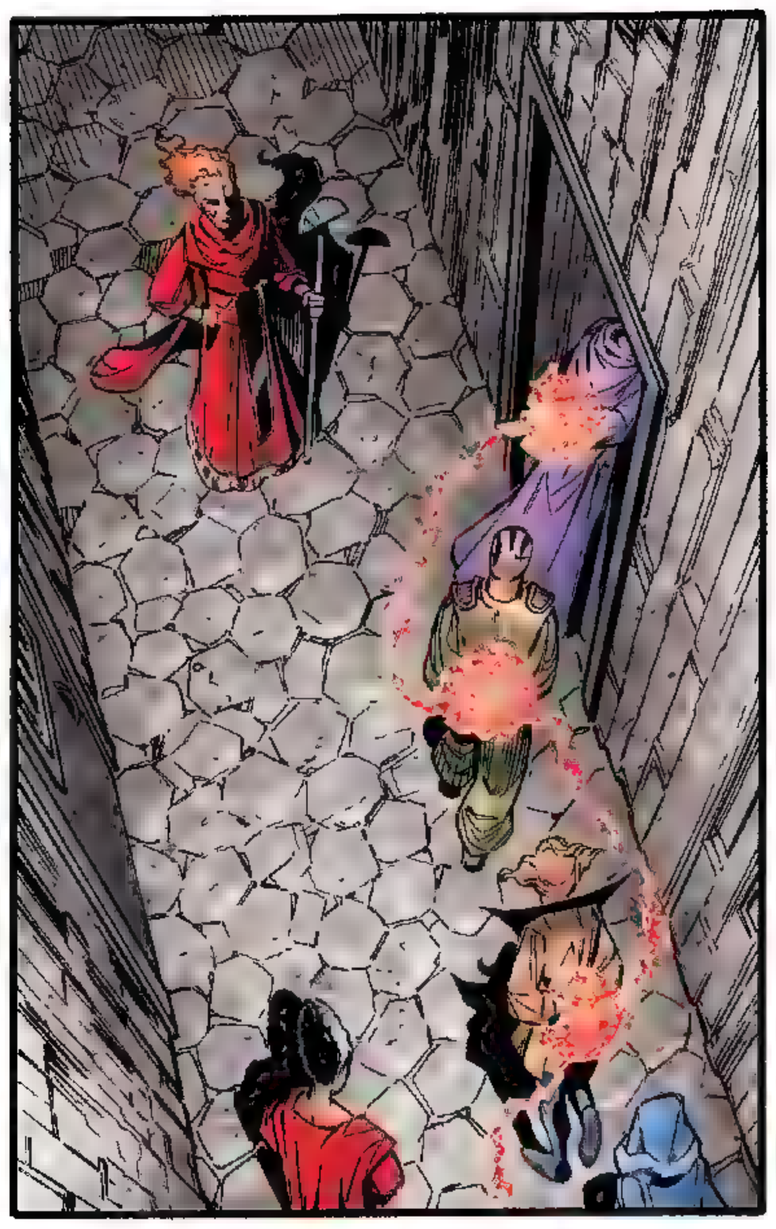

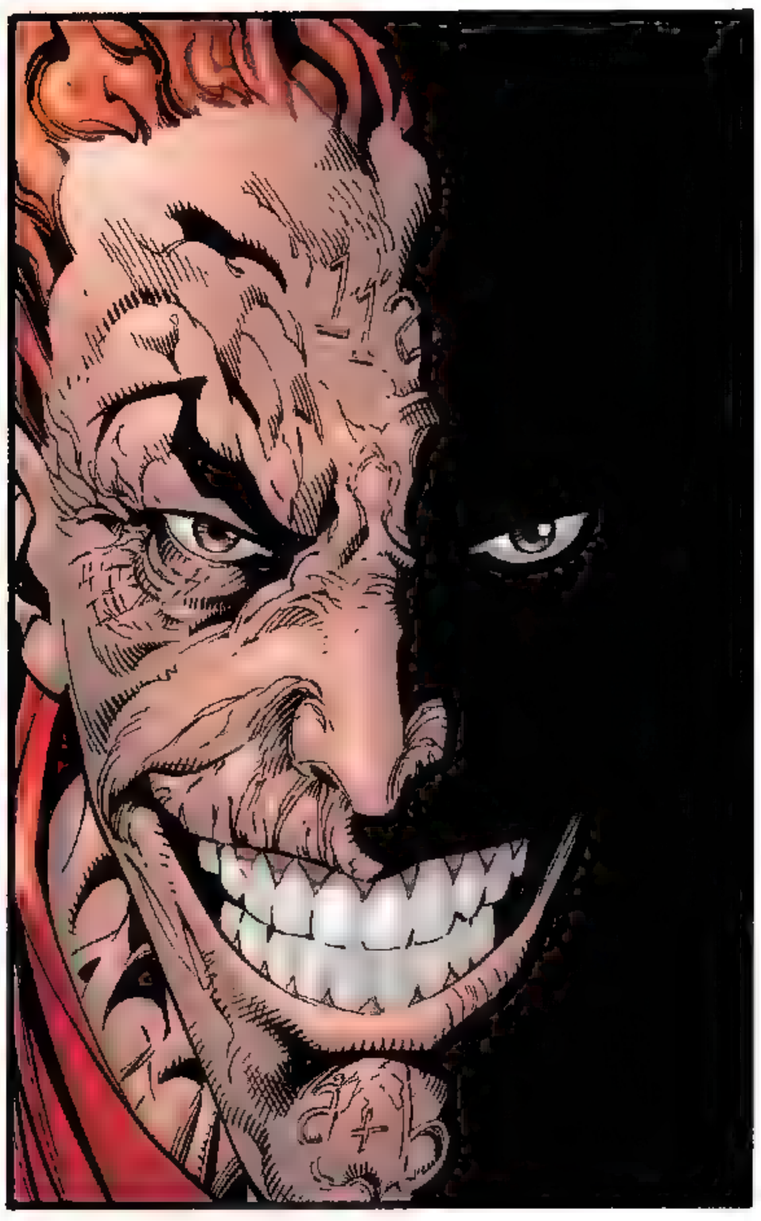

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OBSERVE, GISELLE, THE DERIVATION OF MAGIC IN THE LANDS OF THE ***DJINN GUILD***.

IT WAS A COMBINED EFFORT WITH THE ***DJINN SPIRITS*** WHO REVEALED TO US THE MYSTICAL ENERGIES.

GUILD MASTERS AROUND THE WORLD CONSIDER THIS ***THE*** KEY MOMENT IN OUR HISTORY. BUT, AS USUAL, THEY ***MISS*** THE POINT.

LESS GLAMOROUS, THOUGH FAR MORE ***IMPORTANT,*** WAS AN INVENTION THAT WAS PURELY HUMAN IN ORIGIN: ***MATHEMATICS***.

MATH...?!

LISTEN, *ARCHEMUS*, IF YOU CAME DOWN HERE TO WIN ME OVER, MATH IS *NOT* THE WAY TO GO...

HOW ARE YOU DOING THIS, BY THE WAY? IT'S THE MOST CONVINCING *ILLUSION* I'VE SEEN SINCE I MET *INGRA*...

WHO IS "*INGRA*"?

Ah...NOBODY. JUST AN ACQUAINTANCE.

ANYWAY, I'M SURE ALL YOUR MATH-TALK WAS, er, *ADDING UP* TO SOMETHING...?

WHAT I WAS GETTING AT, GISELLE, IS THAT MATHEMATICS IS A *LANGUAGE* THAT CAN EXPRESS ANYTHING AND EVERYTHING UNDER THE SUN.

IT TAKES ALL THE MESSY COMPLICATIONS OF THE WORLD AND *REDUCES* THEM TO ELEGANT EQUATIONS AND CONCLUSIVE PROOFS.

MATH IS THE LANGUAGE OF *TRUTH*.

THE DJINN GUILD CODIFIED ITS MAGIC AS COMPLICATED, MOSTLY ***CEREMONIAL,*** SETS OF SPELLS AND SUMMONINGS.

--AND THE GUILDS THAT FOLLOWED ***FURTHER*** OBSCURED THE TRUTH OF MAGIC BENEATH LAYERS OF ARTIFICE, SYMBOLISM, AND GENERAL ***MUMMERY.***

THEY CAME TO REGARD THESE AFFECTATIONS AND BELIEF SYSTEMS AS THE ***SOURCE*** OF THEIR UNIQUE POWERS--

--WHEN, IN FACT, THEY WERE ***ALL*** DOING THE VERY SAME THING: CREATING A TEMPORARY ***FOCUS*** FOR UNSEEN ENERGIES TO ACHIEVE SPECIFIC ***OUTCOMES.***

"ONLY ***ONE*** GROUP IN THOSE EARLY DAYS SAW PAST THE SURFACE CLUTTER TO THE UNDERLYING TRUTH OF MAGIC.

"THE ***GEOMETER GUILD*** WASTED NO TIME ON OVERWROUGHT CEREMONY.

"WE DISTILLED THE CHANNELING OF THE UNIVERSAL ENERGIES INTO BASIC MATHEMATICAL EXPRESSIONS--

"--AND THUS ***REFINED*** OUR MAGIC INTO A PURER, MORE EFFECTIVE MYSTICISM THAN ANY CONCEIVED OF BEFORE OR ***SINCE.***

I'M NOT SURE I *UNDERSTAND*...

Oh, BUT YOU *DO!* YOU HAVE FROM THE *START!*

EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS *HATED* ABOUT MAGIC: THE RITUALS, THE INCANTATIONS, THE MYTH AND THE DOGMA--

--YOU WERE *RIGHT* TO HATE IT, BECAUSE IT'S ALL *BUNK!*

WE WIELD MAGIC AT ITS PUREST AND MOST BASIC.

WE HAVE *USED* THAT POWER SINCE ITS INCEPTION TO QUIETLY GUIDE THE COURSE OF HISTORY.

WE GOADED THE EARLY GUILDS INTO *DESTROYING* THE BURGEONING SCHOOLS DEVOTED TO MATH AND SCIENCE.

ONLY ENOUGH MATH TO MAINTAIN *COMMERCE* WAS PERMITTED TO REMAIN...

...INSURING THE DOMINANCE OF *THEOCRACIES,* AND KEEPING THE POWER OF SCIENCE IN *OUR* HANDS ALONE.

IN TIME, WE ENGINEERED THE *ASCENSION* OF SPECIFIC GUILD MASTERS, INCLUDING THOSE WHO FIRST VANQUISHED THE DEMON QUEEN.

EACH OF THEM, FROM LeCAVALIER OF THE NOUVEAU, TO MINDOKA OF THE SHAMAN, ATTAINED THEIR LOFTY POSITIONS ONLY BECAUSE IT SUITED *OUR* PURPOSES.

THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD ONLY *SEEMS* LIKE A RANDOM SUCCESSION OF EVENTS. IT WAS, IN FACT, AUTHORED BY *US*.

THE QUESTION NOW, GISELLE VILLARD, IS WHETHER YOU WISH TO BE A *PAWN*...OR A *PLAYER*.

THINK ABOUT IT. EVERYONE THROUGHOUT YOUR LIFE HAS PULLED YOUR STRINGS, PUSHED YOU THIS WAY AND THAT.

NOW IS THE MOMENT YOU STOP BEING A *VICTIM*.

WELL...

IT IS A BIG DECISION, BUT THE MORE YOU CONSIDER IT, THE CLEARER IT WILL BECOME THAT YOU SHOULD *ACCEPT* MY OFFER.

AND BECOME A *TRAITOR*, LIKE THE MAGUS AND VASHUA?

OR, YOU COULD REFUSE AND SLOWLY SINK TO THE LEVEL OF YOUR *CELLMATE*. THE CHOICE IS YOURS.

I'LL BE BACK FOR YOUR ANSWER. RIGHT NOW, I HAVE A *WORLD* TO TIDY UP...

DARROW, DO YOU BELIEVE THE *NERVE* OF THAT GUY?

GISELLE, YOU ARE AS POWERLESS AS I AM RIGHT NOW. IF THE GEOMETERS OFFER YOU FREEDOM, *TAKE* IT!

OUTSIDE THESE WALLS, YOUR WORLD IS PROBABLY DESCENDING INTO *ANARCHY*, SINCE THE GUILD MASTERS ARE ALL EITHER COOPERATING WITH ARCHEMUS, OR LOCKED UP IN THIS DUNGEON.

YOUR ONLY CHANCE TO HELP YOURSELF OR ANYONE ELSE IS TO PLAY IT THE GEOMETER WAY.

EVERYONE RETURN TO YOUR HOMES! A STATE OF EMERGENCY HAS BEEN DECLARED!

THE REASON FOR THIS EXTRAORDINARY MEETING IS *OBVIOUS*.

AS *SECOND-IN-COMMAND* OF OUR RESPECTIVE GUILDS, IT FALLS TO *US* TO RESTORE ORDER.

EACH OF US HAS TAKEN STEPS TO *QUELL* CIVIL UNREST IN OUR LANDS, BUT THE DISAPPEARANCE OF OUR GUILD MASTERS HAS ALREADY *LEAKED* TO THE MEDIA--

EXCUSE ME, BROTHER JULIAN. LET US SKIP THE SUMMARY AND GET RIGHT TO THE *POINT*.

I AM THUSIUS OF THE TANTRIC GUILD.

I FIND IT *SUSPICIOUS* THAT MOST OF THE MASTERS VANISHED FROM A MEETING AT THE LUNAR SANCTUM CONTROLLED BY THE *NOUVEAU* MASTER.

YES, BUT, *YOUR* MASTER *CONVENED* THAT MEETING!

WHERE IS MASTER VASHUA *NOW*?

WERE SHE AND THE MAGUS TAKEN SEPARATELY?

OR DID *THEY* PLAN THE ABDUCTIONS...?!

GENTLEMEN, *PLEASE!* THIS IS JUST WHAT WE NEED TO *AVOID!*

!

INTRUDER!

GREETINGS, GOOD PEOPLE OF CIRESS.

TODAY, YOU FIND YOURSELVES *DIVIDED* BY FEAR.

YOUR WORLD LEADERS HAVE BEEN ***SUBTRACTED*** FROM THEIR GUILDS, AND YOU WONDER ***WHO*** COULD HAVE ENGINEERED SUCH AN OUTCOME?

IT WAS *ME*.

TELL ME WHERE THE MAGUS IS ***NOW,*** OR I'LL--

MY NAME IS ***ARCHEMUS,*** AND I AM A MASTER OF A GUILD NONE OF YOU HAS EVER HEARD OF BEFORE: THE ***GEOMETER*** GUILD.

FOR CENTURIES, WE HAVE BEEN *THE* PRIME FACTOR BEHIND THE THRONES OF CIRESS...

IGNORE ME AT YOUR PERIL! I ***WILL*** HAVE ANSWERS FROM YOU!

JULIAN! DID YOU SEE--

LONG HAVE WE ***PLOTTED*** THE CURVE OF HUMAN EVENTS TO YIELD OUR DESIRED COROLLARIES.

OH. YOU'VE GOT ONE IN HERE, *TOO*.

GOT ONE *WHAT,* THIERRY?

KEEPING OUR EXISTENCE *SECRET* SERVED US WELL AS LONG AS THE SEVEN GUILDS SHARED POWER.

THIS GUY. "ARCHEMUS." HE'S *EVERYWHERE!*

HOWEVER, THAT BALANCE OF POWER WAS RECENTLY *NULLIFIED* WHEN THE GUILD SPIRITS WERE FRACTIONED OFF FROM THE MASTERS.

IT'S *SIMPLER* IF YOU JUST SEE FOR YOURSELVES.

SEE...?

THE RESULTING POWER VACUUM--

--PRODUCED SEVERAL MONTHS--

--OF DANGEROUS *CHAOS.*

AND SO TODAY, I, ARCHEMUS, FIFTY-FOURTH MASTER OF THE GEOMETER GUILD, STEP FORTH TO PUBLICLY RESTORE *ORDER*.

NOW, I AM WELL AWARE--

--THAT IN THE PAST--

--*OTHERS* HAVE STAKED CLAIMS--

--TO GLOBAL POWER.

AND IF THE *DEMON QUEEN* HERSELF FAILED IN HER BID FOR CONQUEST...

...THEN WHY SHOULD YOU BELIEVE A PERFECT STRANGER LIKE *ME?*

SO I HAVE PREPARED A DEMONSTRATION OF SUCH SCOPE AND IMPACT--
--THAT NO ONE MAY DENY MY HEGEMONY.
TODAY, I WILL CLAIM THE LIVES OF EVERY MAN, WOMAN, AND CHILD IN ONE OF THE GUILD LANDS.
TO MAKE THE AFTERMATH LESS MESSY, I HAVE CHOSEN THE ONE GUILD LAND MOST LIKELY TO RESIST MY PUBLIC MASTERY OF CIRESS.
PLEASE STAND BY, AS THE TEAMING MULTITUDES OF THE DARK MAGI LANDS FACE THEIR FINAL MOMENTS.

NOOO!

WHAT *HAPPENED*, LILLA?

I.. I'M REACHING OUT...TRYING TO CONTACT ANYONE...

BUT...

THE PEOPLE OF THE DARK MAGI LANDS ARE ***NO MORE***. YOUR OWN NEWS SERVICES WILL SOON ***CONFIRM*** THIS FACT.

NO... WAIT...THAT'S NOT QUITE ***TRUE***...

THERE...

NOW THEY ARE ALL DEAD.

AHH--

I WILL SOON MAKE ARRANGEMENTS WITH YOUR CAPTIVE GUILD MASTERS TO ***FORMALIZE*** MY NEW GOVERNMENT.

UNTIL THEN, TRY NOT TO DO ANYTHING THAT MIGHT INVITE MY SPECIAL

WELL, *THAT* WAS EXHILARATING...

A MOST LETHAL EXTRAPOLATION OF THE *DISTRIBUTIVE PROPERTY.*

DID YOU TWO SCHEDULE MY MEETING WITH THE *EQUAAR?*

THEY WILL ARRIVE IN *EXACTLY* HALF AN HOUR.

INDEED, THEY *ARE* PUNCTUAL CREATURES.

JUST *ONE* OF THE MANY REASONS I VALUE THEM SO...

KRAKOOM

ARCHEMUS! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!

KRAKA

THOOM

I NEVER AGREED TO THE SLAUGHTER OF MY PEOPLE!

I *APOLOGIZE*, MY FRIEND, BUT IF I HAD TOLD YOU WHAT I HAD PLANNED *BEFOREHAND*, YOU NEVER WOULD HAVE *AGREED* TO IT.

OF COURSE I WOULDN'T!

BUT, YOU SEE, WE ARE NOT YET *FINISHED* WITH YOUR PEOPLE.

WHAT IN THE FOUR MOONS ARE YOU *TALKING* ABOUT? THEY'RE CERTAINLY FINISHED--THEY'RE ALL *DEAD!*

INDEED THEY ARE. BUT I'LL WAGER THAT IF YOU PERFORM A *RITE OF REVENANCE*, I COULD *EXTEND* ITS EFFECTS FROM THE NORTHERN STEPPES DOWN TO THE KALAKISTAN SEA.

...THE RITE OF REVENANCE...

ARCHEMUS, MY VERY BAD FELLOW, YOU *DO* THINK BIG...

THERE WAS A DAY WHEN I WAS WORSHIPPED AS A *GOD* ON NO LESS THAN FIVE DIFFERENT WORLDS.

ARROH-RA, THEY CALLED ME.

"*THE DAZZLING ONE.*"

HATE TO BURST YOUR BUBBLE, DARROW, BUT YOU ARE *SOOO* FAR FROM DAZZLING RIGHT NOW.

I NEVER THOUGHT, EVEN AFTER TASTING DEFEAT AT *YOUR* HANDS, THAT ANOTHER MORTAL COULD EVER PREVAIL AGAINST ME.

I NEVER THOUGHT I'D ENCOUNTER ANYTHING LIKE THE *GEOMETERS*.

MAGIC--YOUR PEOPLE'S RUDIMENTARY MANIPULATION OF THE UNIVERSAL ENERGIES--IS A UNIQUE AND *ADMIRABLE* ACCOMPLISHMENT.

IT IS, NEVERTHELESS, HIDEBOUND BY NEEDLESS MUMBO-JUMBO.

NOT SO, THE GEOMETER SORCERY, WHICH IS AS *PURE* AND MATHEMATICALLY ELEGANT AS POSSIBLE.

AND ITS *GREATEST* EXPRESSION IS THE GEOMETER *MASTER SPELL*--THE METHOD BY WHICH YOU AND I HAVE BEEN MYSTICALLY *INSULATED*...

...*CUT OFF* FROM THE ENERGIES, FROM THE *POWER* THAT ONCE WAS MY BIRTHRIGHT.

I NEVER WOULD HAVE THOUGHT SUCH A THING *POSSIBLE*. IF THE GEOMETERS CAN BRING ONE OF *THE FIRST* TO HIS KNEES, THEN ARCHEMUS IS THE MOST *DANGEROUS* HUMAN IN THE UNIVERSE!

I THINK YOUR *QUEEN* OR WHATEVER SHE IS, INGRA, WAS AFRAID OF THE SAME THING.

YOU MET *INGRA...?*

SHE WARNED ME THAT SOME *"GREAT THREAT"* LURKED ON CIRESS. I THINK SHE WANTED ME TO *FIND* IT AND GET *RID* OF IT.

PROBABLY BECAUSE SHE WAS TOO SCARED TO COME DO IT *HERSELF.*

INGRA *SCARED?* I DON'T THINK SO.

BUT SHE *IS* A CONSUMMATE *MANIPULATOR.* WHY *BOTHER* CONFRONTING THE PROBLEM HERSELF WHEN SHE HAS SUCH A PERFECT *PAWN* AS YOU?

PERHAPS NOW SHE WILL BE *FORCED* TO TAKE DIRECT ACTION. CLEARLY, THE LIMITED WISDOM OF YOUR *GUILDS* WAS NOT UP TO THE CHALLENGE.

AS IF YOU'D *UNDERSTAND!*

TO YOU WE'RE ALL LIKE *ANTS.*

IN A MILLION YEARS YOU'D NEVER BE BOTHERED TO *LEARN* WHAT THE GUILDS REALLY STAND FOR.

YOU DON'T HAVE THE *HEART* TO UNDERSTAND.

FWASH

EXCITED, MAGUS? DOES NOT THE PROMISE OF ABSOLUTE UNQUESTIONED AUTHORITY OVER YOUR SUBJECTS *FILL* YOU WITH ANTICIPATION?

YOU MISTAKE ANTICIPATION FOR *DREAD*.

WHAT IF THIS DOESN'T *WORK*? CREATING *ONE* REVENANT IS A NOTORIOUSLY IFFY PROPOSITION. CREATING AN ENTIRE *NATION* OF THEM...

...IS A SIMPLE FRACTAL REPLICATION, RE-INDEXING A CLOSED SET.

JUST CONCENTRATE ON REANIMATING *ONE* OF YOUR SUBJECTS, AND LET *ME* TAKE CARE OF THE REST.

VERY WELL...

ZTHUM

SHAKOOM

...MAAA... GUSSS...!

...MA-GUS...

...MA-GUS...

...MA-GUS...

...MA-GUS...

..MA-GUS...

...MA-GUS...

...MA-GUS...

...WHAT IS YOUR BIDDING, MY MAGUS...?

MUSIC TO MY EARS.

CONGRATULATIONS. THE DARK MAGI LANDS HAVE NEVER BEEN *DARKER.*

GEN!
GEN, CAN YOU HEAR ME?

YES! I'M IN A CELL JUST DOWN AND ACROSS THE HALL FROM YOU, WITH YINMA AND MONDRU!

MASTER ZAI AND MASTER ATYAAH ARE IN THE CELL ACROSS FROM US!

GEN, WE HAVE TO BREAK OUT OF HERE SOMEHOW. WE HAVE TO WORK TOGETHER.

GISELLE, HUSH! IF A GUARD OVERHEARS--

THERE ARE NO GUARDS! MY, uh, CELLMATE HAS BEEN HERE MUCH LONGER THAN US, AND HE SAYS HE'S NEVER SEEN ONE!

I GUESS THEY DON'T NEED GUARDS AFTER WHAT THEY'VE DONE TO US. PLUS, THE FEWER PEOPLE WORK HERE, THE MORE SECRET THE PLACE STAYS!

WONDERFUL. STRATEGIC INSIGHTS FROM THE IDIOT SISTER...

SO HOW DO YOU PROPOSE WE GET OUT IF NONE OF US CAN MAGICK OPEN THE LOCKS?

YEAH... I'M, uh... *WORKING* ON THAT...

...NOT THAT THERE'S MUCH IN HERE TO WORK *WITH*...

SORRY.

YOU'LL SEARCH FOR AN *EPOCH* BEFORE YOU FIND ANYTHING USEFUL IN *THERE,* GISELLE.

!

BUT BY ALL MEANS, DO *TRY.* YOUR EFFORTS SHOULD PROVE ENTERTAINING.

COME TO *GLOAT?*

ACTUALLY, I HAVE COME TO GREET VISITORS. *BUSINESS* ACQUAINTANCES, TO BE PRECISE.

THIS IS A LOUSY EXCUSE FOR A *RECEPTION HALL.*

I WANT THEM TO SEE FOR THEMSELVES WHO MY *GUESTS* ARE, TO REMOVE ANY DOUBT OF MY ABILITY TO DELIVER THE RATHER EXORBITANT *PAYMENT* I PROMISED THEM FOR SERVICES RENDERED.

SO IT IS *TRUE*. HE HAS CAGED THE GUILD MASTERS.

YES. I RECOGNIZE THIS ONE, CHIEF ARCHITECT.

MASTER GENEVIEVE, WHO BROUGHT US THE *ROSE*.

A TREASURE, TO BE SURE, BUT MASTER ARCHEMUS OFFERS US A FAR *GREATER* PRIZE.

AND THE OFFER STILL *STANDS*, GENTLEMEN. YOU HAVE ALREADY DELIVERED UNTO ME THE TOOL OF *CONQUEST*...

...ONCE YOU COMPLETE CONSTRUCTING MY TOOL OF *IMMORTALITY*, THE ASTRAL LANDS THAT SO FASCINATE YOU SHALL BE *REMOVED* FROM CIRESS, AS PROMISED --

--AND *SHUNTED* INTO THE EQUAAR PLANE... MY FINAL *PAYMENT* FOR YOUR SINGULAR CONTRIBUTION TO THE *FUTURE* OF MY WORLD!

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--EXACTLY LIKE THE LAST TIME, WHEN SHE WAS CAST INTO THAT WORLD WITHOUT MAGIC!

WHEN WE LOST CONTACT, THE MAGUS AND THE TANTRIC MASTER STOOD AGAINST HER.

COULD THEY HAVE SHUT DOWN HER MYSTICAL TALENTS?

NO SPELL IN VASHUA'S REPERTOIRE COULD DO SUCH A THING.

I WOULD ASK THE DARK MAGI SPIRIT, BUT...

You're better off **without** the old windbag, if ya ask **me!**

Oh--!

SKITTER...?!

HOW DID YOU APPROACH UNNOTICED?

Later with the questions. Right now, there's something you should definitely **watch.**

Our girl Giselle's in a **tight spot.** She's held prisoner by a guy named **Archemus**--Master of the Geometer Guild.

THE GEOMETERS? BUT THEY'RE JUST A MYTH!

Then sit back and enjoy Giselle's finest hour up against your so-called *"myth"*...

HONORED GUESTS FROM THE *EQUAAR CONTINUUM*...

...YOU HAVE CONTRIBUTED IMMEASURABLY TO THIS LATEST *TRIUMPH* IN MY STORIED CAREER.

"*THANK YOU*" HARDLY SEEMS *SUFFICIENT*.

KEEP YOUR EXPRESSIONS OF GRATITUDE. OUR *TERMS* REMAIN THE SAME:

WE CONSTRUCT MAGIC-ENHANCING *TECHNOLOGY* TO YOUR SPECIFICATIONS AND INSTALL SAID TECHNOLOGY IN THAT *SCEPTER* OF YOURS...

...AND YOU DELIVER TO US THE *ASTRAL LANDS*.

WE HAVE DONE *OUR* PART. WHEN WILL YOU HONOR *YOUR* END OF THE BARGAIN?

HUMORLESS AS *EVER*, I SEE...

YOU KNOW, A SHARP SENSE OF *HUMOR* INDICATES SUPERIOR INTELLECT.

OUR *PAYMENT*...?

AS YOU CAN SEE, MY PLAN FOR THE *RECONFIGURATION* OF THE MAJOR LANDMASSES ON CIRESS FACTORS IN THE *SUBTRACTION* OF THE ASTRAL LANDS.

THE ACTUAL DELIVERY WILL DEPEND UPON SEVERAL VARIABLES THAT CANNOT BE QUANTIFIED AT THE MOMENT, BUT IT SHALL NOT BE MUCH LONGER. A FEW DAYS AT MOST.

AND *THEN*, CHIEF ARCHITECT, YOU AND YOUR PEOPLE CAN STUDY THE CHAOTIC MAGICKS AND INFINITE PERMUTATIONS OF THE ASTRAL GUILD FOR THE REST OF YOUR DAYS.

I TRUST THE MAGUS AND I AREN'T TOO *LATE* FOR THIS CONFERENCE?

WE WILL *OVERLOOK* THE INSULT OF YOUR TARDINESS.

ONE MUST *EXPECT* SUCH DISAPPOINTMENTS FROM THOSE WHO WOULD *BETRAY* THEIR OWN PEOPLE.

YOU HAVEN'T THE CAPACITY, MUCH LESS THE RIGHT, TO JUDGE *MY* ACTIONS, CREATURE.

I SMELL THE *TAINT* OF SCIENCE AND MACHINERY HERE, ARCHEMUS. I CERTAINLY HOPE *YOU* DO NOT INDULGE IN SUCH...ABOMINABLE MATTERS.

...AND FROM THE ***SHAMAN*** GUILD, I LEARNED THAT TRUE UNDERSTANDING OF MAGIC COMES FROM ***DIRECT*** EXPERIENCE OF THE MYSTICAL.

YOU CAN ***TALK*** ABOUT IT ALL YOU WANT, BUT UNTIL YOU ACTUALLY DO IT--

DO YOU HOPE TO ***SPEED*** MY DEMISE BY ACTUALLY ***BORING*** ME TO DEATH?

I'M JUST TRYING TO SHARE A FEW LESSONS I PICKED UP IN MY TRAVELS. YOU KNOW, GET THE OLD NOODLE WORKING? TRY AND THINK A WAY OUT OF HERE?

IT BEATS SITTING AROUND FEELING ***SORRY*** FOR YOURSELF.

ANYHOW... THEN I WENT TO THE ***DJINN*** LANDS, WHERE I FOUND OUT THAT MAGIC WAS ACTUALLY INVENTED TO HELP OUT SOME RACE OF SPIRIT-CREATURES CALLED DJINNS--

--WHO'D ***LOST*** THE ABILITY TO TAP MYSTICAL ENERGIES...

CAN YOU ***IMAGINE?*** ANCIENT HUMANS HELPING MAGICAL CREATURES AT THEIR OWN GAME...

WHICH MAKES ME WONDER IF ***ARCHEMUS*** DIDN'T GET SOME KIND OF ***OUTSIDE HELP***...

THAT... *PROTRACTOR*-THINGIE HE ALWAYS CARRIES AROUND. *IT'S* THE KEY.

"PROTRACTOR"...?

YOU KNOW--THE LITTLE *HALF-CIRCLE* DOODAD? FROM GEOMETRY CLASS...?

DON'T YOU HAVE *ELEMENTARY SCHOOL* WHERE YOU COME FROM?

ANYHOW, THOSE *HORSE-FACE* GUYS MEETING WITH ARCHEMUS ARE THE *SAME* ONES WHO REBUILT THE NOUVEAU CATHEDRAL AFTER YOUR PAL ANIMORA TORE IT DOWN.

THEY'RE *CALLED* THE...

...THE...

THEY'RE CALLED THE *EQUAAR ARCHITECTS,* GISELLE!

THANKS, GEN!

AS I WAS SAYING, ARCHEMUS MUST HAVE A PRETTY SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THESE EQUAAR GUYS IF HE BROUGHT THEM HERE TO SHOW OFF HIS PRISONERS.

AND SINCE IT'S OBVIOUS FROM OUR ACCOMODATIONS THAT HE DIDN'T HAVE THEM REMODEL THIS *=ahem=* ***RUSTIC*** CATHEDRAL OF HIS, THEN THEY MUST'VE BUILT HIM SOMETHING *ELSE...*

AND YOU'RE SUGGESTING THAT THEY *DID* SOMETHING TO HIS *SCEPTER*--

PROTRACTOR.

WHATEVER YOU CALL IT, THESE TECHNOLOGISTS PROVIDED SOMETHING TO THE GEOMETER MASTER THAT NO ONE ON CIRESS COULD...

RIGHT! I MEAN, WHAT IF THIS ***MASTER SPELL*** OF HIS, THIS ABILITY TO CUT US OFF FROM THE MYSTICAL ENERGIES...

...WHAT IF HE NEEDS THAT PROTRACTOR THINGIE TO MAKE THE MASTER SPELL ***WORK?***

THEN YOU MAY AS WELL CALL IT A ***CRUTCH!***

RIGHT, GEN!

IF I CAN GET OUT OF THIS CELL, MAYBE I CAN SEPARATE HIM FROM THAT STICK...

...MAYBE EVEN ***DESTROY*** IT...

WELL, ***THERE*** YOU HAVE IT! SUCH A BRILLIANT ***PLAN!***

OF COURSE, ***STEP ONE*** IS GETTING OUT OF THIS CELL, AND SINCE ***THAT*** WON'T HAPPEN, I GUESS WE'LL NEVER GET TO ***TEST*** YOUR *"PROTRACTOR THEORY"...!*

YEAH, YEAH...EVERYONE I MET IN MY TRAVELS UNDERESTIMATED ME, ***TOO.*** I'M ***USED*** TO IT.

Y'KNOW, DARROW, SARCASM ISN'T EXACTLY ***ATTRACTIVE,*** AND YOU NEED ALL THE HELP YOU CAN ***GET*** THESE DAYS...

WANNA KNOW WHAT I LEARNED FROM THE *ASTRAL GUILD?*

NO...

I LEARNED THAT SOMETIMES IT PAYS TO THROW OUT THE RULE BOOK AND APPROACH PROBLEMS IN ENTIRELY *NEW* WAYS.

I DON'T SEE ANY *SENTRY SPRITES* INSIDE THIS LOCK.

JUST SOME *METAL* BITS.

INTELLIGENT PEOPLE CALL THOSE *"TUMBLERS."*

ARCHEMUS *TURNED* A LITTLE PIECE OF METAL INSIDE THERE TO UNLOCK THE DOOR.

IF ONLY I HAD SOMETHING THE SAME BASIC *SIZE* AND *SHAPE*...

GISELLE...?

WHAT ARE YOU--

Shhhh!

SHWFF

TA-DAA!

AND JUST HOW IS YOUR *BRASSIERE* GOING TO HELP?

...NOT... ⇒nff⇐...THE *BRA*... ...⇒nn⇐...

...THERE. IT'S THIS PIECE OF UNDER*WIRE* THAT'LL GET US OUT.

FOR ONCE I'M *GLAD* I NEED THE EXTRA *SUPPORT*...!

OKAY, OKAY...YOU GET POINTS FOR *INSPIRATION*. HOWEVER, LOCK-PICKING IS A SKILL THAT TAKES TIME TO MASTER.

TIME IS SOMETHING WE HAVE *PLENTY* OF IN HERE...

CHK KLK CHK SKK

PLEASE FORGIVE THE MAGUS' *COMMENTS*, GENTLEMEN. NOT EVERYONE ON CIRESS SEES TECHNOLOGY AS *EVIL*.

CALLING IT *"EVIL"* WOULD BE A *COMPLIMENT!*

IT IS *REPUGNANT* AND *LAZY*, AND IF OUR PLANS DEPEND UPON WHAT THESE *BEASTS* PROVIDE--

--THEN I'M SORRY I EVER GOT INVOLVED WITH YOU, ARCHEMUS!

YOUR LACKEY'S OPINION OF US IS IRRELEVANT.

LET US *CONCLUDE* OUR TRANSACTION.

YOU *BROUGHT* THE IMMORTALITY DEVICE? MAY I *INSPECT* IT?

THE PAYMENT *FIRST*.

CHK KK CHK SKK

WE WILL HONOR THE SECOND HALF OF OUR DEAL ONLY *AFTER* YOU SHUNT THE ASTRAL LANDS TO OUR PLANE.

WE SHALL AWAIT YOUR PAYMENT. PLEASE BE PROMPT.

YOU PROMISED THEM THE *ASTRAL LANDS?!* WHY *BOTHER* CONQUERING THE WORLD IF YOU GIVE THE BEST PARTS AWAY?!

YOUR ALLY *UNDERMINES* OUR CONFIDENCE IN YOU, ARCHEMUS...

I WAS TRYING TO RESTORE SOME *GOODWILL* WITH THEM, MAGUS! YOU CERTAINLY DIDN'T *HELP*.

TAKE CARE THAT YOU DO NOT WIND UP ON THE WRONG END OF MY *MASTER SPELL*.

DO NOT *FLATTER* YOURSELF BY CALLING THAT PARLOR TRICK A *SPELL*...

I HAD *HOPED* WHEN I THREW IN WITH YOU TWO THAT, AT THE VERY LEAST, YOU WOULD BEHAVE LIKE *GROWN-UPS*.

ZZZZZZZZZ

CHK KK CHK SKK

SHOULDN'T WE HELP HER?

Can't. We can see her because I know where she **is,** but until she breaks the Geometer spell, she's still cut off from your magic.

CUT OFF FROM **US,** BUT WHAT ABOUT **YOU?** WHY CAN'T YOU RETURN THERE AND --

And **ruin** her best chance to **prove** to you that she's the **real deal?**

I've **always** known Giselle was a hero. It's why I chose her in the first place.

CAN WE NOT AT THE VERY LEAST **ADVISE** HER?

You already **did.** Haven't you **noticed?**

YES. ALL THE **LIFE-LESSONS** SHE PICKED UP FROM OUR GUILDS ARE WHAT GOT HER **THIS** FAR...

KCHK KLAK

KLIK

IT WORKED--!

ALTWAAL'S EYES...

GEN? I'M OUT OF MY CELL!

WE *KNOW*. WE'VE BEEN *LISTENING*.

MOST IMPRESSIVE.

I'M GONNA GO UPSTAIRS. IF I STAY AND TRY TO PICK *YOUR* LOCK, I MIGHT BE AT IT FOR *HOURS*.

JIGGLE *THIS* INSIDE THE KEYHOLE. MAYBE YOU'LL GET LUCKY LIKE *I* DID.

LUCK HAD LITTLE TO DO WITH IT, GISELLE. BE *CAREFUL*...

YOU DON'T *HAVE* TO COME, DARROW.

I WOULDN'T MISS THIS FOR *ANYTHING*.

IF I *LOWER* THIS, CAN I TRUST YOU NOT TO DO ANYTHING *RASH?*

TRUST THE *MAGUS?* ARE YOU *SERIOUS?*

"*RASH,*" eh?

MAGUS, YOU JUST THREW AWAY YOUR *FUTURE!*

I'M GOING *HOME* NOW.

LET ME KNOW IF YOU TWO WORK THINGS OUT.

YOU MEAN LIKE *THIS?*

IT DIDN'T *HAVE* TO END THIS WAY, MAGUS! YOU *FORCED* MY HAND!

THE *NOUVEAU* GUILD TAUGHT ME TO EMBRACE *CHANGE*...

LOOKS LIKE THINGS HAVE CHANGED FOR *ARCHEMUS*.

YOU CAN DENY ME MY *SORCERY*, BUT YOU'LL NEVER ESCAPE FROM THE TRUTH: YOU'RE A *FAKE!* A *CHARLATAN!*

YOU'VE TURNED YOUR BACK ON THE HEART OF MAGIC-- TRADED YOUR INTEGRITY FOR THAT ABHORRENT *INSTRUMENT!*

THIS IS OUR *CHANCE*, DARROW. CAN I TRUST YOU TO *HELP*?

WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO *DO*?

I DIDN'T DO IT! DON'T PUNISH *ME*-- IT WAS ALL *HER* FAULT!

WHAT ARE *YOU* DOING OUT OF YOUR *CAGE*?!

GISELLE PICKED THE *LOCK!* SHE'S PROBABLY HALFWAY *HOME* BY NOW!

COME SEE FOR *YOURSELF!* JUST DON'T BLAME *ME!*

NOW TELL ME THE *TRUTH!* WHERE *IS* SHE?

...SHE... ...nff... SHE...

RESIST, AND I'LL DESTROY WHAT'S LEFT OF YOUR MIND!

...SHE'S WAITING TO *BLUDGEON* YOU ONCE I LEAD YOU OUT THE DOOR.

SEVEN SPIRITS...I CAN'T CATCH A BREAK--!

YAAHHHH...!

Oh, COME NOW...

DAH

PLEASE TELL ME THAT *WASN'T* THE FULL EXTENT OF YOUR PLAN!

YOU GOT ALL THE WAY FROM YOUR CELL UP *HERE*, AND THE *BEST* YOU COULD COME UP WITH WAS TO--

eh--?

YOU KNOW, I HAVE *YET* TO SEE YOU CAST A SPELL WITHOUT RESORTING TO THIS TRINKET.

JUST WHAT *CAN* YOU DO *WITHOUT* IT!

YOU CAN'T DO *ANYTHING* WITHOUT IT, CAN YOU?

YOU TIED UP *ALL* OF YOUR POWER IN THAT THING!

I...

SO WHAT IF I *DID?*

IT WON ME THE *WORLD*, IN CASE YOU HAVEN'T NOTICED.

WE THREE ARE *EQUALLY* POWERLESS NOW, BUT WHEN MY OTHER *ACOLYTES* GET HERE, THEY'LL--

SLAP

SMAK

SLAPPITY SLAPPITY SLAP

WHAP

FAPP

PAP SMAK

⇒nnf⇐

OWWW!

⇒whung⇐

CARE TO PLACE A *BET*, STRANGER?

STOP *FOOLING AROUND*, GISELLE!

Y'KNOW... ⇒*hff*⇐...THIS MAKES A WEIRD KIND OF *SENSE*...⇒*hff*⇐...THAT IN THE END I'D HAVE TO TAKE YOU OUT THE *TANTRIC* WAY...

⇒*ah*⇐... WHAT ARE YOU *BABBLING* ABOUT?

YOU CAN'T WORK A TANTRIC SPELL RIGHT NOW...OR *ANY* SPELL FOR THAT MATTER!

WITH OR WITHOUT SPELLS, THE TANTRICS KNOW HOW TO GET--

--PHYSICAL!

⇒EEP⇐

FOR A *GENIUS*, YOU SHOULDA KNOWN BETTER THAN TO MIX IT UP WITH SOMEONE *HALF* YOUR AGE WITH *TWICE* THE MUSCLES...

SO. YOU PLAN ON *KEEPING* THAT THING?

CERTAINLY *NOT!*

A WORLD WITHOUT MAGIC IS NO WORLD FOR *ME!*

KRASSH

BLESSED ELYSIA!

THE SPELL IS *BROKEN!*

YESSS... I HAD *HOPED* THAT WOULD BE THE RESULT OF DESTROYING THAT CURSED TALISMAN!

WELL...I GUESS I WAS WAITING FOR THE WHOLE PLACE TO...Y'KNOW... *COLLAPSE* OR SOMETHING.

I MEAN, ISN'T THAT THE SORT OF THING THAT *USUALLY* HAPPENS WHEN YOU DESTROY THE BAD GUYS' SOURCE OF *POWER*...?

YES, I IMAGINE IT *IS*...

HA

WHAT?

WHAT ARE YOU *STARING* AT?

MAGUS, WE CAN STILL WORK SOMETHING OUT--!

I THINK *NOT.*

RED

KRUNK

WHY'D YOU HAVE TO *KILL* HIM?

BECAUSE I *CAN!*

ONCE AGAIN, I HAVE POWER *ENOUGH* TO--

--GO *HOME.*

THAT *IS* WHAT YOU WERE GOING TO SAY... *RIGHT?*

YOU WOULD SET THIS WORM *FREE* AFTER ALL HE'S *DONE?*

MY BIG LESSON FROM THE *ENCHANTRESS* GUILD...

...SOMETIMES YOU NEED TO *KEEP* YOUR ENEMIES. SOMETIMES IT'S THEM THAT MAKE YOU *STRONG.*

WE COULDN'T HAVE WON TODAY *WITHOUT* THE MAGUS. THERE'LL BE *OTHER* CHANCES TO SETTLE THE SCORE...

*I AM NOT CERTAIN THAT I **APPROVE** OF HER RELEASING THE MAGUS, BUT STILL...*

*...I WILL NEVER **DOUBT** GISELLE AGAIN.*

*HARD TO BELIEVE THAT'S THE SAME FLIGHTY **PARTY-GIRL** WHO THREW THE GUILDS INTO SUCH DISARRAY.*

She's **not.**

She's the **woman** I always knew she **could** be.

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WHERE ARE YOU *FROM?*

WHY ARE YOU WEARING *THESE?*

ARE YOU AND *SHE* TOGETHER?

WOULD YOU *BOTH* LIKE SOME COMPANY...?

NO, WE ARE *NOT*... *"TOGETHER."*

I'M HERE ON OFFICIAL BUSINESS, AND I DON'T TRUST HIM ENOUGH TO LEAVE HIM ALONE.

DARROW, THIS IS AWKWARD ENOUGH WITHOUT YOU CARRYING ON WITH THESE GIRLS--!

BUT...BUT THEY APPROACHED ME...!

THEN POLITELY TELL THEM TO GET LOST! I HALF EXPECT THESE PEOPLE TO BLAME ME FOR THEIR GUILD MASTER'S CRIMES. I DON'T NEED TO WORRY ABOUT YOU ON TOP OF THAT--!

I SWORE TO YOU THAT I AM A CHANGED MAN, AND SO YOU SHALL SEE THAT I AM.

GISELLE VILLARD! YOU KNOW YOU ARE UNWELCOME HERE. WHAT COULD POSSIBLY COMPEL YOU TO RETURN TO THE TANTRIC LANDS?

LONG STORY, um...

THUSIUS.

RIGHT. SO, THUSIUS, DO YOU THINK WE COULD *TALK* FOR A MINUTE? Y'KNOW IN *PRIVATE?*

FIRST, YOUR COMPANION WILL CHANGE OUT OF THESE *RAGS*. THIS IS OUR *CATHEDRAL* AFTER ALL...

I...

I MEANT NO OFFENSE.

SECOND, THERE IS *NOTHING* YOU CAN TELL ME THAT CANNOT BE SAID IN FRONT OF THE GUARDS.

FINE.

YOU ALREADY KNOW A *SECRET GUILD* CAPTURED THE MASTERS OF THE MAJOR MAGICAL GUILDS AND TRIED TO TAKE OVER CIRESS.

WHAT YOU *DON'T* KNOW IS THAT YOUR GUILD MASTER, VASHUA, WASN'T THEIR VICTIM, SHE WAS THEIR *ALLY.*

I STOPPED THEIR PLOT, AND NOW VASHUA IS ON THE *LOOSE*-- SOMEWHERE IN *YOUR* TERRITORY, I SUSPECT.

JUST THOUGHT YOU'D RATHER *HELP* ME, THAN HAVE ME TURN THIS LAND *UPSIDE DOWN* TRYING TO FIND HER.

...OF COURSE...

...AND SHE ALLIED US WITH THE *DARK MAGI*...? HOW COULD I HAVE *MISSED* THIS? I WAS *WITH* HER EVERY DAY...!

MASTER ARCHEMUS AND HIS GEOMETER GUILD WERE *ALL ABOUT* KEEPING THEIR ACTIONS HIDDEN.

THEY SAID THEY'D BEEN GUIDING MOST BIG EVENTS IN HISTORY FOR THE PAST FIVE HUNDRED YEARS...

...NOW *THEY'RE* HISTORY, AND VASHUA HAS TO ANSWER FOR WHAT SHE DID.

CAN YOU THINK OF ANYWHERE SHE MIGHT *HIDE?* OR ANY TECHNIQUES OF YOUR GUILD'S MAGIC THAT WOULD AID HER?

Mmm...VASHUA GREW UP NEAR A VOLCANO THAT IS SACRED TO OUR PEOPLE-- MONS CHAKRA. THAT IS WHERE I WOULD BEGIN THE SEARCH.

BUT I *WARN* YOU THAT SHE WILL NOT BE TAKEN *ALIVE*. IT WOULD NOT SURPRISE ME IF SHE INVOKED AN ERUPTION JUST TO TAKE YOU WITH HER.

WHICH BRINGS ME TO A DELICATE MATTER: WITH VASHUA IN DISGRACE, THE GUILD COUNCIL WISHES TO APPOINT *ME* AS OUR NEW GUILD MASTER.

HOWEVER, WE CANNOT APPOINT A NEW MASTER UNTIL THE OLD MASTER IS *DEAD*.

SO IF SHE FORCES YOU TO *KILL* HER, COMFORT YOURSELF WITH THE KNOWLEDGE THAT WE WILL NOT MOURN A *TRAITOR*.

LET'S *GO*, DARROW. WE HAVE A LOT OF GROUND TO COVER.

I REALLY MUST COMPLIMENT THESE PEOPLE ON THE *DÉCOR*. THESE STATUES ARE QUITE ***EXQUISITE*** IN THEIR OWN WAY.

TRUE, THEY LACK THE UTTER ***PERFECTION*** OF ANY *OBJET D'ART* BACK HOME ON ELYSIA, BUT I NOW FIND THAT ITS VERY ***FLAWS*** ARE WHAT GIVE YOUR ART SUCH ***CHARACTER***.

EVEN YOUR ***ARCHITECTURE*** IS CHARMING IN ITS ROUGH-HEWN ELEGANCE AND NAÏVE ASPIRATIONS. WHY DID I NEVER SEE THIS ***BEFORE...?***

SORRY TO ***SIDETRACK*** YOU FROM YOUR LITTLE EPIPHANY, BUT WE HAVE AN ***ENEMY*** TO CATCH.

QUITE RIGHT. MONS CHAKRA.

FWASH

ANOTHER THING, DARROW...

...THE *NEXT* TIME YOU WANNA SHARE YOUR GEE-WHIZ OBSERVATIONS ON WHY US MORTALS AREN'T SO BAD AFTER ALL... *DON'T*.

I MEANT NO--

WE WERE CLOSE ONCE, AND YOU *USED* ME. MAYBE *TECHNICALLY* SPEAKING IT WASN'T RAPE, BUT THAT'S WHAT IT FELT LIKE.

SO *DON'T* PUSH YOUR LUCK WITH ME, AND *STOP* TRYING TO CONVINCE ME YOU'VE TURNED A NEW LEAF.

UNDERSTOOD.

THE ONLY REASON YOU'RE HERE IS BECAUSE OF YOUR...*SPECIAL CONNECTION* WITH VASHUA...

YES... "TECHNICALLY SPEAKING IT WASN'T RAPE"...

"I HAD BEEN THEIR PRISONER FOR WEEKS, WASTING AWAY WITH NOTHING TO EAT OR DRINK...SUSTAINED ONLY BY WHAT ENERGIES REMAINED IN MY BODY...

"...THEN SHE BEGAN *VISITING* MY CELL IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT...

"I SUPPOSE SHE COULDN'T RESIST SUCH AN UNUSUAL... *PLAY-THING*.

"AND I SUPPOSE THAT I THOUGHT I COULD SOMEHOW TURN THE SITUATION TO MY ADVANTAGE.

"ALL I ACCOMPLISHED WAS TO LET HER *STEAL* WHAT LITTLE VITALITY...WHAT LITTLE *HOPE* REMAINED WITHIN ME."

I KNOW HER *ESSENCE*... INTIMATELY. IF SHE IS CLOSE, I WILL *FEEL* IT.

THEN LET'S GET ON WITH IT...

Yow!

WELL...?

NOTHING YET. SORRY.

How about askin' the Guild Spirits?

MAY AS WELL...

HELLO, *TANTRIC SPIRIT?*

HEROTUS, ARE YOU LISTENING IN...?

OF COURSE, GISELLE. WE ARE ALWAYS MONITORING YOUR ACTIONS.

WHETHER I LIKE IT OR NOT.

SO, ANY *POINTERS* ON HOW TO FIND VASHUA?

I HAVE BEEN PONDERING THAT VERY QUESTION. THERE ARE **SEVERAL** THINGS SHE MIGHT HAVE DONE IN ORDER TO HIDE.

SHE MAY NOT EVEN LOOK LIKE HERSELF ANYMORE.

IS IT ***TRUE*** WHAT THUSIUS SAID: THAT SHE WOULD MAKE THE ***VOLCANO*** BLOW TO AVOID BEING CAPTURED?

YES.

OKAY... DO YOU GUYS HAVE A ***TEMPLE*** OR SOMETHING SOMEWHERE ACTUALLY ***ON*** THE MOUNTAIN?

THERE **IS** A SMALL MEDITATION SHRINE NEAR THE SUMMIT, BUT THE **MAIN** TEMPLE IS IN THE CITY AT THE FOOT OF MONS CHAKRA.

I'M THINKING IF THE VOLCANO IS HER WEAPON OF LAST RESORT, SHE'LL NEED TO BE RIGHT ON ***TOP*** OF IT.

GISELLE! I AM SENSING HER PRESENCE...

SHE IS NEARBY... THOUGH I CANNOT SAY EXACTLY WHERE.

GISELLE...ABOUT THE USE OF *DEADLY FORCE* AGAINST HER...

YEAH, I'M NOT LOOKING FORWARD TO IT, BUT I'M *READY* IF IT COMES TO THAT. WE CAN'T TAKE ANY *CHANCES* WITH HER.

ACTUALLY, WHAT I WAS *GOING* TO SAY--

Ah, folks...?

SO MUCH FOR *SNEAKING UP* ON HER!

I'LL DRAW HER FIRE--YOU TRY TO *OUTFLANK* HER.

AS YOU WISH...

RRRUMMMBBBBLE

BETTER HURRY!

GISELLE VILLARD! I *KNOW* YOU HAVE COME TO *KILL* ME!

LEAVE *NOW*, OR I WILL BURY US *ALL* IN BRIMSTONE!

PLEASE— THINK OF THE *INNOCENTS* BELOW!

COME ON, DARROW... LET'S GET THIS OVER WITH.

PLEASE... HEROTUS...WHEREVER YOU ARE...GRANT HER THE WISDOM TO—

GOT HER!

THROW HER CLEAR!

NO, WAIT!

SHRAKT

AHHH!

DARROW! WHY?!

HE...HE *KNEW*...

...→groan←...

END OF THE LINE, YOU EVIL--

WAIT!

DON'T, GISELLE! THAT'S *NOT* VASHUA!

WELL...NOT *EXACTLY*...

huh?

KROOM

BOOM

FSHHHHHHHH

THERE. I'VE CALLED IT OFF. WILL YOU HEAR ME OUT?

THIS BETTER BE *GOOD*...

VASHUA *SWITCHED BODIES* WITH ME! SHE...

...SHE SAID YOU'D COME TO *KILL* ME--THAT YOU WOULD CAST FIRST AND ASK QUESTIONS LATER!

I...I *HAD* TO DEFEND MYSELF, BUT I WOULD NEVER HAVE REALLY LET THE VOLCANO BLOW...

BUT...IF THERE'S REALLY *SOMEONE* ELSE IN HER BODY, THEN...

WHEN DID YOU *FIRST* SENSE THIS BODY-SWAP THING?

BACK AT THE CATHEDRAL. I KNEW RIGHT AWAY THAT VASHUA'S ESSENCE WAS HIDING IN THE BODY OF BROTHER *THUSIUS*.

AND YOU DIDN'T THINK THIS WAS WORTH *MENTIONING*...?!

IF I HAD TIPPED OUR HAND THEN, WE MIGHT NEVER HAVE FOUND VASHUA'S BODY--

--IN ORDER TO REVERSE THE SPELL. I GET IT.

BUT WHY EXCHANGE *THIS* BODY FOR AN OLD MAN'S CREAKY BONES?

Because this way she could fake her death and **still** cling to power...

"...in fact, she's probably arranging her own Rite of Ascension right about now."

MAKE CERTAIN THE V.I.P. SEATING IS CORDONED OFF.

HAS ANYONE HEARD FROM THE *CATERERS?*

MASTER--!

FWASH

GUARDS!

YOU... *CAPTURED* HER--?!

ALIVE?

GUARDS! TAKE HER TO THE DUNGEON *IMMEDIATELY!*

NOT SO FAST, VASHUA.

GIVE ME BACK MY *BODY*, YOU BACKSTABBING *HAG!*

WHO DO WE--?

I DON'T *KNOW!*

DARROW, MY *PET*...

...COME TO *TAKE BACK* YOUR POWER?

ah...

nff

KRAKOOM

KRAKOOM

GISELLE! YOU *DO* CARE!

DON'T GET CARRIED AWAY...

Oomph

Oomph

...*ONE* GOOD TURN... DESERVES *ANOTHER*...

SHUT UP!

Oomph!

YAAHH!

NOOOO...!

=unh=

=gah=

THUSIUS...?

YES... IT'S *ME*. MY THANKS TO *BOTH* OF YOU.

WOULD YOU BE SO KIND AS TO ESCORT THIS *DISGRACE* TO OUR DUNGEON, MISTER...?

DARROW.

THE GUARDS WILL SHOW YOU THE WAY, MISTER *DARROW*. ONCE SHE IS INSIDE A CELL, THE GLYPHS AND WARDS SHOULD HOLD HER.

YOU'RE NOT GOING TO...YOU KNOW...?

KILL HER? NO, I DON'T THINK SO.

I COULDN'T GIVE THAT COMMAND IN COLD BLOOD, REGARDLESS OF WHAT SHE'S DONE.

BUT HOW WILL YOU APPOINT A NEW GUILD MASTER?

I'VE BEEN THINKING THAT PERHAPS WE SHOULD *NOT.*

AND FORFEIT YOUR STATUS AS ONE OF THE SEVEN MAJOR GUILDS?

I THINK PERHAPS THAT WAS *ALREADY* LOST THE MOMENT VASHUA BROKE TRUST WITH THE WORLD COMMUNITY.

I THINK WE HAVE SOME INTERNAL PROBLEMS TO OVERCOME BEFORE WE WORRY TOO MUCH ABOUT TEMPORAL POWER.

HEROTUS? YOU *CATCHING* ALL THIS?

YES, GISELLE. AND I THINK BROTHER THUSIUS IS CORRECT. AT THIS POINT, A HIATUS FROM THE WORLD STAGE WILL DO US GOOD.

FOR MY PART, I CAN AFFORD TO WAIT AS LONG AS IT TAKES FOR THE TANTRIC GUILD TO REHABILITATE ITS REPUTATION.

WHAT ABOUT *YOU,* DARROW?

TO BE HONEST, I'D LIKE TO STAY HERE AND *LEARN* FROM THESE PEOPLE.

STUDYING THE GUILDS SEEMED TO DO *YOU* A WORLD OF GOOD. PERHAPS I, TOO, WILL FIND SOME OF THE WISDOM YOU GAINED.

Kind of a **gamble,** leaving Darrow to his own devices, ain't it?

I THINK HE EARNED A CHANCE TO PROVE HIMSELF WHEN HE TOOK THAT BOLT MEANT FOR VASHUA.

OR SHOULD I SAY IT WAS MEANT FOR ***THUSIUS***.

IN VASHUA'S BODY, THAT IS...

WHY IS IT THAT THIS PLACE CONFUSES ME EVEN WORSE THAN THE ***ASTRAL*** LANDS?

All that body stuff--sex, love, whatever--it's **supposed** to be confusing.

Most people spend a **lifetime** trying to sort it out, and they never do.

For what it's worth, I think you did the right thing. Darrow really **did** seem changed.

REMEMBER THE *LAST* TIME WE RAN INTO SOMEONE ON THIS ROAD?

Yep. The **succubus.** Not exactly our finest hour.

AT LEAST ***THIS*** TIME, WE'RE LEAVING WITH OUR HEADS HELD HIGH...

HELLO, THERE.

!

GREETINGS, GISELLE VILLARD.

I BELIEVE YOU *HAVE* SOMETHING THAT BELONGS TO *ME*...

We've got **trouble**, kid! **Big** trouble!

A different take on
Giselle and Skitter
pencils by Paul Pelletier
inks by Roland Paris
colors by Wil Quintana

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THAT *THING* ON YOUR PALM IS *MINE*. I WANT IT *BACK*.

Giselle, this is trouble with a capital "T"...

Don't... do...anything... **stupid...**

Uh... YOU WANNA *CLARIFY* THAT A BIT...?

IS THIS YOUR LONG-LOST *DAUGHTER*, OR SOMEHTING? I MEAN, SHE'S GOT YOUR *EYES*...

You have no idea.

Giselle, meet **Solusandra.** She's the one who put that sigil on your palm. Only, she's not quite **herself** right now...

GUESS *AGAIN,* SKITTER. IT WAS DEFINITELY A *MAN* WHO SLIPPED ME THE SIGIL.

er, *THAT* DIDN'T QUITE COME OUT RIGHT...

YOU TWO FIGURE IT OUT LATER. NOW, COME HERE...

=groan=

Giselle, NO!

Fighting her is the worst thing you can do!

GISELLE, WAIT!

PERHAPS THIS WOMAN IS NOT A THREAT!

SHE COULD BE THE ANSWER TO ALL OUR PROBLEMS!

GET TO THE *POINT*, SPIRITS--I'M A LITTLE *BUSY* RIGHT NOW!

IT WAS YOUR SIGIL THAT ORIGINALLY TRAPPED US WITHIN YOU!

IF SHE *REMOVES* IT, WE MIGHT FINALLY BE FREE TO RETURN WHERE WE *BELONG!*

AND WHAT IF REMOVING IT *KILLS* ME?!

NOT TO MENTION WHAT KIND OF *DAMAGE* THIS GIRL MIGHT DO IF SHE TAKES THE SIGIL FOR *HERSELF!*

BOY, ARE YOU *NOT GETTING IT--!*

SIGIL

IF YOU POURED WATER INTO THE *OCEAN*--

--WOULD YOU EXPECT THE SEA TO *OVERFLOW?*

THAT'S *ALL* YOUR SIGIL IS TO ME: A DROP IN THE BUCKET!

MY DROP!

MY BUCKET!

=gasp=

NOW LET'S GET THIS *OVER WITH.*

=mmph!=

Ah-*ah...*

DON'T SPOIL THE MOMENT.

...NO...
...nuh...

AHHHHH!

FREE!

FREE!

FREE!

FREE!

FREE!

HURRY! GET THOSE CHILDREN SOMEWHERE WARM AND COMFORTABLE!

WHAT DID YOU FIND OUT, THIERRY?

IT'S BAD! INITIAL REPORTS FROM ACROSS THE NOUVEAU LANDS INDICATE THAT IT WASN'T JUST THE GUARDS HERE WHO TURNED INTO BABIES.

YOU CAN'T MEAN...

I'M AFRAID SO.

THE ENTIRE NOUVEAU MILITARY HAS BEEN REDUCED TO INFANCY! EVERY LAST SPELL-SNIPER, WARD-SMITH AND GLYPH ENGINEER...!

I JUST WISH-- gasp

GEN?! WHAT'S WRONG? WHAT HAPPENED?!

I'M... I'M *OKAY*, THIERRY.

SOMETHING JUST HAPPENED... SOMETHING I'VE WAITED A *LONG TIME* FOR...

*YES, GENEVIEVE. I AM **FINALLY** WITH YOU...AS I WAS MEANT TO BE SINCE THE MOMENT YOU BECAME **MASTER** OF THE NOUVEAU GUILD...*

*INDEED, **ALL** OF THE ETERNAL SPIRITS HAVE FINALLY BEEN RELEASED FROM OUR **IMPRISONMENT** WITHIN YOUR SISTER.*

*"EVEN NOW, THEY HASTEN TO **REJOIN** THE MASTERS OF THE OTHER MAJOR MAGICAL GUILDS.*

*"AT LAST, THE RIGHTFUL BALANCE OF POWER CAN BE **RESTORED** ACROSS ALL OF CIRESS...*

*"...AND EACH GUILD MASTER CAN USE THE ANCIENT WISDOM AND POWER WE PROVIDE TO BRING ORDER AND PROSPERITY **BACK** TO THEIR RESPECTIVE LANDS..."*

"...ALL OF WHICH PUTS THE SIX BENEVOLENT MASTERS ON EQUAL FOOTING WITH THE **ONE** GUILD MASTER WHO HAD **ALREADY** RECLAIMED HIS ETERNAL SPIRIT..."

ARCHEMUS MAY NOT HAVE DELIVERED EVERYTHING HE PROMISED, BUT HE CERTAINLY CHANGED ***THIS*** PLACE FOR THE BETTER.

I'M NOT SO SURE, MAGUS. A NATION OF REVENANTS SEEMS LIKE AN INSPIRED IDEA, BUT...

BUT ***NOTHING***, YOU VEXING VAPOR. THEY BOW TO MY WILL. ***ALL*** OF THEM.

I WON'T HAVE YOU SPOIL MY GOOD MOOD...

TELL ME, FIRST ACOLYTE, HOW GO THINGS TODAY IN MY DARK KINGDOM?

ALL OF THE... NEW ARRANGEMENTS YOU DEMANDED ARE... BEING PUT INTO EFFECT, MAGUS...

THE BORDERS HAVE... ALL BEEN CLOSED. OUR TROOPS ARE... CONCENTRATING ALONG THE NOUVEAU FRONTIER.

GOOD. *GISELLE* VILLARD MAY HAVE DEMURRED FROM FIGHTING ME, BUT HER IDIOT SISTER MIGHT LEAD THE NOUVEAU ARMY TO OUR DOORSTEP OVER MY ALLIANCE WITH ARCHEMUS.

OUR GENERALS BELIEVE... WE CAN QUICKLY REPEL...AN ATTACK FROM THE ASTRAL LANDS...SHOULD IT COME TO THAT.

JUST LET THEM *TRY*...

WHAT ABOUT *INTERNAL* OPPOSITION? ANY MERCHANTS OR TRADERS COMPLAINING ABOUT THE BORDER CLOSINGS?

ANY DISSIDENTS OR TROUBLEMAKERS TO *EXECUTE*?

OF COURSE NOT, MAGUS. WE BOW TO YOUR WILL. ALL OF US.

THINK OF IT, MAGUS...NO MORE CRACKDOWNS...

...NO MORE PUBLIC HANGINGS, BURNINGS OR IMPALINGS...

...NO MORE TURNING CHILDREN AGAINST THEIR PARENTS...

NO MORE *FUN*...

There! You've got what you came for!

Now get the hex **out** of here and leave us **alone!**

DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO!

DO YOU KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO THE *LAST* ORANGE-EYED BALL OF FUR THAT TRIED TO GET IN MY WAY...?

N-now wait a minute...

HEY! ANDRA, NO!

WE DON'T NEED ANY DEATHS HERE! THE TALKING SQUIRREL'S JUST TRYING TO PROTECT HIS MISTRESS. HE THINKS YOU HURT HER, AND--

AND--

AND ANDRA, *LOOK!* HE'S A *TALKING SQUIRREL!* HE'S REALLY CUTE! ISN'T HE REALLY CUTE?

Aw... LOOK...ISN'T HE *CUTE?* HE REMINDS ME OF INFOE!

INFOE?

MY OWN LITTLE ANIMAL FRIEND. OF COURSE, HE'S THE ONLY SURVIVOR OF AN ALIEN SPECIES, BUT HE TALKS...

HEY-- THERE'S A *SIGIL* ON YOUR SUIT! SKITTER, WHAT IN THE FOUR MOONS IS GOING ON HERE?

NOTHING.

LET'S GO, LINDY. I *HAVE* WHAT I CAME

SEVEN SPIRITS...TELL ME IT WAS...ALL A *NIGHTMARE* ..

I...*WASN'T* DREAMING... WAS I...

STORY OF MY *LIFE*--!

JUST WHEN I *FINALLY* GET MY ACT TOGETHER, SOMETHING LIKE *THIS* ALWAYS HAPPENS...!

C'mon, kid, buck up...

FWAAOM

you back home with your **sister,** and give you a little time to adjust to your loss. But I'm **tellin'** ya-- it's not quite the loss you think it is...

BUT...I'VE LOST *EVERYTHING,* SKITTER! THE *SIGIL*... THE *SPIRITS*... THE...

...

GEN...?

IN A MINUTE, GISELLE...

SEED

NO EFFECT.

AGAIN.

WHY CAN'T I *REVERSE* THE SPELL...?

COO...

GEN, WHAT *HAPPENED* HERE?

TWO WOMEN CAME LOOKING FOR *YOU,* GISELLE.

THE ONE CALLED *LINDY* SEEMED REASONABLE ENOUGH, BUT THE ONE CALLED *ANDRA*...

...SHE TRANSFORMED THE *ENTIRE* NOUVEAU ARMY INTO BABIES!

IT'S JUST A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE WORD GETS OUT THAT WE'RE *DEFENSELESS!*

SO WHAT HAPPENED TO *YOU?*

Ah.

NO WONDER THE NOUVEAU SPIRIT CAME TO ME...

WORD MUST'VE SPREAD PRETTY *FAST*, GEN!

WE JUST HEARD FROM THE *BORDER*--THE DARK MAGI ARE MASSING TROOPS NEAR ALL THE CHECKPOINTS.

WE ONLY HAVE SPELL-CLERKS AND NEOPHYTES MANNING THOSE POSITIONS, SO THEY DON'T REALLY *UNDERSTAND* WHAT THEY'RE LOOKING AT...

...BUT THEY SAID THE D.M. *TROOPS* LOOKED..."*WEIRD*."

I NEED BETTER INTELLIGENCE THAN *THAT*, THIERRY!

THEN WE'D BETTER TRAIN SOME NEW WARRIOR-MAGES *FAST*.

GEN...?

IN A *MINUTE*, GISELLE! THIS IS *IMPORTANT!*

PERHAPS WE COULD REQUEST HELP FROM THE *ASTRAL* GUILD...?

OR WE COULD SUMMON REINFORCEMENTS FROM THE SUBTLE PLANES...

WE'RE OVERLOOKING THE OBVIOUS SOLUTION

WE SHOULD *GO*, SKITTER...JUST IN THE WAY HERE...

CAN'T BELIEVE I ACTUALLY *MISS* THAT SIGIL THINGIE...!

Giselle, all the Sigil really did was unlock something you **already** had inside...

YOU'RE NOT ***LISTENING!*** IT WAS ***NEVER*** EASY FOR ME! WITHOUT THE SIGIL, I COULDN'T MANIPULATE ***SQUAT!***

WHAT ARE YOU *TALKING* ABOUT, SKITTER? BEFORE I GOT THE SIGIL, I COULDN'T WORK ANYTHING PAST A PRIMARY-SCHOOL INCANTATION...!

KID-STUFF!

But the **ease** with which you manipulate energy--

I'm not listening...?!

Fine! As usual, you gotta learn the hard way...

FWAASH

SKITTER, WHAT DID YOU *DO*?

DON'T I HAVE *ENOUGH* TO DEAL WITH HERE?

Relax, she's okay.

I just sent her to someone who'll show her that she's not gonna miss her sigil **one bit!**

SKITTER, WHAT *ARE* YOU, REALLY? AND WHAT DO YOU WANT WITH MY *SISTER*?

I just want her to be **ready,** Gen...

"The time's not far off when your baby-trouble will seem like a picnic, and when that day comes, Giselle **has** to play her part."

KWASH

WHERE IN THE--?

WHY'S THIS LOOK *FAMILIAR*...?

GISELLE?!

MISTER SNOW-MONSTER?!

AW, PIXIE-POOP!

WHOEVER YOU ARE, I'M ***WARNING*** YOU...!

PLEASE, IT'S "YETI."

THANK THE SPIRITS! I WAS AFRAID I MIGHT NOT SEE A FAMILIAR FACE FOR MONTHS!

I, TOO, HAD HOPED TO SEE YOU AGAIN-- PREFERABLY UNDER MORE *GENIAL* CIRCUMSTANCES.

GISELLE, WE MUST *VACATE* THIS AREA WITHOUT DELAY!

WHAT'S *WRONG?* IS SOMEONE *AFTER* YOU?

ROOOAARRR!

ONE *COULD* PUT IT THAT WAY...

SKITTER'S GONNA HAVE A *LOT* TO ANSWER FOR...!

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C'MON, YETI--MAGICK US *OUTTA* HERE!

I *CANNOT*, GISELLE! THIS LAND REMAINS *BEREFT* OF MYSTIC ENERGIES--

"--OUR DRACONIAN PURSUER IS THE *GUARDIAN* OF THE GEOMETER CURSE!"

I WAS STEALING INTO HIS LAIR, WHEN-- ⇒*whulp*⇐

YETIIIII...!

GRAAHHRR

SNAKE

HOW MUCH DO YOU *WEIGH*?!

Wha--?!

FWEET

NEVER MIND--EITHER THIS *WORKS*, OR I DIE FEELING *FOOLISH!*

WHAT *NOW*?!

YOU PLAN TO *CHOKE* THAT THING WITH MY BIG, FAT--

-AAAAAAAAA-

--→hup←

THUMP

YOU DIDN'T SAY YOU'D BRING *COMPANY!*

IT WOULD SEEM THAT YOU ARE NOT *TOO* HEAVY.

IS THAT *ATOOK*...?!

...SO YOU GUYS ARE *STILL* STUCK WITHOUT MAGIC?

I THOUGHT WHEN I BEAT THE GEOMETER GUILD, WHATEVER THEY DID TO ROB YOUR WORLD OF ITS MYSTICAL ENERGIES WOULD, Y'KNOW...*WEAR OFF.*

UNFORTUNATELY *NOT.* I'D HOPED WHEN I FIRST SAW YOU THAT YOU HAD RETURNED TO SET THINGS RIGHT.

NOT EVEN CLOSE!

ACTUALLY, SKITTER SENT ME HERE CUZ I WAS *COMPLAINING* ABOUT LOSING THE SIGIL.

SKITTER...?

HE'S A *FRIEND* OF MINE, ATOOK. ACTUALLY, HE'S A WHOLE LOT *MORE* THAN HE APPEARS.

YETI SAYS HE WAS KNOWN AS *"ANDAR"* AROUND THESE PARTS.

MIGHTY *ANDAR* IS YOUR FRIEND?! WHY DIDN'T HE COME TO RESTORE OUR WORLD *HIMSELF?*

I THINK HE'S TRYING TO TEACH ME A *LESSON*.

REMEMBER THAT RED AND YELLOW THINGIE THAT USED TO BE ON MY PALM? THE *SIGIL*...?

IT'S WHAT MADE ME SUCH A HOT-SHOT MYSTIC IN THE *FIRST* PLACE. NOW IT'S GONE, AND I'M BACK TO BEING NOBODY SPECIAL.

ARE YOU *CERTAIN*...?

THAT IT'S *GONE*? SEE FOR YOURSELF!

NO. I MEAN: ARE YOU CERTAIN THAT SOME EPIDERMAL *PIGMENT* WAS THE SOURCE OF YOUR LEGERDEMAIN?

YOU GREW *PETULANT* OVER YOUR LOSS. PERHAPS "SKITTER" DISPATCHED YOU HERE TO LEARN THAT YOU *STILL* POSSESS THE CAPACITY TO LIBERATE OUR WORLD.

Y'KNOW, FOR A SUPER-GENIUS, YOUR OPTIMISM SEEMS KINDA *NAIVE*.

ALLOW ME TO RECOUNT A LITTLE TALE THAT MAY SHED SOME LIGHT ON YOUR SITUATION...

"HUNDREDS OF YEARS AGO, A *MULTITUDE* OF MY KIND COHABITATED PEACABLY IN THESE MOUNTAINS...

"OURS WAS A TIGHTLY-KNIT COMMUNITY, AND WHILE WE ESCHEWED *MATERIAL* ACCOMPLISHMENTS, OUR ORAL TRADITIONS, MATHEMATICS AND PHILOSOPHY REMAIN UNPARALLELED.

"WE ALSO ENJOYED A GOOD *TIRE SWING*.

"WE LIVED *ABOVE* THE TREELINE, AND ATOOK'S ANCESTORS KEPT TO THE *LOWLANDS*.

"WE VERY RARELY CROSSED PATHS, THOUGH IT WAS USUALLY *AMICABLE* IF WE DID.

"SO IT WAS RATHER UNUSUAL WHEN ONE DAY I WAS TRAVERSING CLOUDSCRAPER RIDGE AND SAW A *MAN*."

"HE HAD *ORANGE EYES* AND LOOKED A BIT MORE HIDEOUS THAN ATOOK'S PEOPLE.

"IN RETROSPECT, I BELIEVE HE MUST HAVE READ MY *MIND*, BECAUSE IN A TWINKLING, HE SUDDENLY LOOKED LIKE THE ANDAR WE ALL KNOW AND REVERE."

GREETINGS, FRIEND. YOU'RE FAR FROM HOME, AREN'T YOU?

FUNNY, BUT I WAS GOING TO SAY THE SAME OF *YOU*. WHAT ARE YOU *DOING* UP HERE?

ADMIRING THE VIEW. A FRIEND OF MINE *MADE* ALL THIS, YOU KNOW.

...*WHAT*...?

WHO *ARE* YOU?

I HAVE *MANY* NAMES. HERE, YOU MAY CALL ME *ANDAR*.

MY ASSOCIATE, SOLUSANDRA, CREATED A GREAT MANY WORLDS. I AM ON A TOUR OF THEM RIGHT NOW, JUST CHECKING ON THINGS, MAKING SURE IT'S ALL GOING WELL...

YOU'RE... A *SAGE*...ON SOME TYPE OF *PILGRIMAGE*, YES? YOU SPEAK METAPHORICALLY...OF A COUNTERPART WHOSE NAME IS AN *ANAGRAM* OF YOUR OWN...

SURE. OKAY. THAT'S AS CLOSE TO EXPLAINING *ME* AS YOU'RE LIKELY TO GET.

BUT ENOUGH ABOUT ME. I'M MORE INTERESTED IN *YOUR* SITUATION...

...THE ONE THAT BROUGHT YOU OUT HERE, SO FAR FROM YOUR HOME, WITH *NO* INTENTION OF EVER *RETURNING*...

HOW DID HE KNOW *THAT* ABOUT YOU?

AS I POSTULATED, HE PROBABLY READ MY MIND, EXTRACTING ALL HE NEEDED TO KNOW IN THE INSTANT WHEN OUR *EYES* MET...

YOU MARCHED OUT HERE TO ESCAPE YOUR OWN *HEARTBREAK*, BUT NO MATTER HOW FAR YOU TREK, YOU CARRY YOUR PAIN *WITHIN* YOU.

HOW DID YOU...?

I COULD TELL YOU THE REST, BUT IT WOULD BE BETTER FOR YOU TO TELL ME IN *YOUR OWN* WORDS.

YES, I LEFT MY PEOPLE THREE DAYS AGO. IT WAS TOO *PAINFUL* TO REMAIN...

...TO SEE MY BELOVED *THELMA* EACH DAY, AND TO KNOW SHE WILL *NEVER* BE MINE...

"THELMA AND I HAD KNOWN EACH OTHER SINCE WE WERE BARELY SIX FEET TALL, AND I HAD *ALWAYS* LOVED HER.

"I ALWAYS ASSUMED THAT ONE DAY SHE WOULD BE MY *MATE*.

"BUT THERE WAS *ANOTHER* WHO INTENDED TO COME BETWEEN US.

"HIS NAME WAS *KANCHENJUNGA*. HE WAS THE PATRIARCH, THE ALPHA MALE IN OUR TRIBE. AND HE WAS NO FRIEND OF MINE..."

"OURS WAS A PEACE-LOVING, GENTLE CULTURE IN ALL BUT *ONE* MATTER...

"...*MATING SEASON*. THE HIERARCHY WAS STRICTLY, UNEQUIVOCABLY *ENFORCED*.

"ONE HAD TO *EARN* THE RIGHT TO CLAIM ONE'S CHOSEN MATE...

"...AND THIS WAS THE YEAR THAT I WOULD *TOPPLE* KANCHENJUNGA FROM THE ALPHA POSITION."

"KANCHENJUNGA REALIZED THIS *TOO LATE*. HIS PRIME WAS PAST AND MINE HAD JUST *BEGUN*.

POIT

"HE *FLAILED* OUT AT ME DESPERATELY, BUT ONLY MANAGED TO FUEL MY *RAGE*...

"...SO I *ENDED* THE CHALLENGE... AND HIS REIGN AS ALPHA MALE...

"I'D WAITED ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS FOR THIS MOMENT."

"AND THEN A *STRANGE THING* HAPPENED AS I WENT TO CLAIM MY PRIZE.

"SHE LOOKED AT ME AS THOUGH *CONFUSED*... AND THEN AS IF SHE DID NOT EVEN *KNOW* ME!

"IT WAS *UNPRECEDENTED*. NO ONE COULD REMEMBER A FEMALE *EVER* SPURNING THE WINNER OF THE MATING CHALLENGE...

"...BUT EVERYONE AGREED THAT IT *WAS* HER PREROGATIVE. WE DO NOT *FORCE* OUR LOVE UPON EACH OTHER, AFTER ALL.."

...AND SO YOU STRUCK OUT ON YOUR OWN, *REJECTED* BY YOUR ONLY LOVE, DETERMINED NEVER TO LOOK UPON HER FACE AGAIN?

PERHAPS IF YOU'RE *LUCKY*, THE RARE AIR AND ARCTIC CHILL WILL SLOWLY *KILL* YOU.

AND FAILING *THAT*, PERHAPS YOU'LL JUST FIND SOME SECLUDED LEDGE FROM WHICH TO *HURL* YOURSELF?

...

YES. THAT'S IT IN A NUTSHELL.

HAHAHAHA!

?

FWASH

YETI...?

FWASH

KANCHENJUNGA, I PRESUME...?

THAT'S RIGHT. WHO ARE YOU?

SO, YETI...WHEN HE *"FLAILED OUT DESPERATELY"* AT YOU...

...DID IT LOOK LIKE THIS?

HURK

POIT

...HURK... THELMA...?

WHAT...

...WHAT DID I EVER SEE IN *YOU*?

WHAT DID YOU...?

YOUR RIVAL KNEW HE COULD NOT DEFEAT YOU OUTRIGHT, SO HE RESORTED TO A ***MARTIAL ARTS*** TRICK.

HE STRUCK A CERTAIN ***NERVE CLUSTER*** THAT EFFECTIVELY SHUT OFF YOUR ***STINK GLAND***--

--AND ***PHEROMONES*** ARE A MAJOR COMPONENT IN SEXUAL ATTRACTION AMONG YOUR KIND.

BASICALLY, AS FAR AS THELMA IS CONCERNED, YOU BOTH SMELL... NEUTERED.

DON'T WORRY, MY FRIEND. IT'S EASY ENOUGH FOR ME TO *RECTIFY*...

WHAT... WHAT'S HAPPENING...?

POP

POP

FROST

SNIFF SNIFF

"WITH A WORD, ANDAR HAD GIVEN ME MY *GROOVE* BACK."

BEFORE HE LEFT, I ASKED ANDAR HOW I COULD EVER *RECOMPENSE* HIM FOR THE GIFT HE HAD GIVEN ME.

HE TOLD ME THAT ONE DAY, A HAIRLESS GIRL WOULD ARRIVE HERE.

HE BADE ME SHARE THE *WISDOM* I GAINED THAT DAY, AND THAT THIS GIRL WOULD KNOW WHAT TO *DO* WITH IT.

WELL...?

WHAT WISDOM?

GIVE ME STRENGTH...

I BELIEVED I'D LOST EVERYTHING, WHEN IN FACT, I STILL *HAD* THE STINK JUICE WITHIN ME!

GISELLE, EACH OF US MUST FIND OUR *OWN "STINK JUICE"* IN THIS LIFE. WE MUST ALL UNLEASH OUR OWN SPECIAL *MUSK*...

IT COMES FROM WITHIN, NOT SOMETHING PLACED *UPON* YOU.

ANDAR, OR *SKITTER* AS YOU KNOW HIM, SENT YOU HERE TO *LEARN* THIS.

HE KNOWS, AS I DO, THAT THE POWER TO TAP THE MYSTICAL ENERGIES STILL EXISTS WITHIN YOU.

NOW HELP ME DEFEAT THE SNOW DRAGON AND *FREE* THIS LAND!

...SO WHEN YOU SAY I HAVE THIS *"STINK JUICE,"* THAT'S JUST, LIKE...A FIGURE OF SPEECH, RIGHT...?

NEVER MIND THAT, GISELLE!

JUST RECOLLECT WHAT IT *FELT* LIKE CASTING THE *BIG* SPELLS...

...YOUR *BODY* WILL REMEMBER THE SENSATION, CHANNELING AND RESHAPING THE UNIVERSAL ENERGIES...

...THROUGH MY *STINK GLAND*... RIGHT...?

WHY DID I EVER EXPECT YOU TO UNDERSTAND A *PARABLE?* SUBTEXT IS *LOST* ON YOU...

GISELLE, WHAT YOUR *"SKITTER"* SENT YOU HERE TO LEARN...

....IS THAT YOUR TALENT FOR MAGIC HAS *NOT* GONE AWAY.

THE *SIGIL* MAY HAVE AWAKENED YOU TO YOUR OWN INNATE ABILITIES, BUT THAT TALENT IS STILL THERE. ONLY THE *SYMBOL* HAS GONE.

NOW, FOCUS ON THE TASK AT HAND: WE MUST GAIN INGRESS TO YON *TEMPLE*--THE SNOW DRAGON'S DOMICILE.

WITHIN IT IS THE *MECHANISM* THAT MAKES THE GEOMETER SPELL PERSIST, LONG AFTER THE SPELLCASTERS THEMSELVES LEFT THIS REALM.

STAY HERE, DAYWING, AND *WARN* US SHOULD YOU HEAR ANYTHING APPROACH.

SQUEEK SQUEEK

SO, HOW DO WE KNOW THE DRAGON'S *NOT HOME* RIGHT NOW?

WE *DON'T.*

SO THAT'S THE DOO-DAD *ARCHEMUS* LEFT HERE TO KEEP ANY MAGIC FROM WORKING IN DINOSAUR LAND, huh?

VERILY.

CAN YOU SENSE THE MAGICAL ENERGIES TRAPPED WITHIN?

Um... NOPE...

TRY NOT TO *OVER-THINK* THIS.

LET YOUR *BODY* RECALL WHAT YOUR MIND HAS FORGOTTEN.

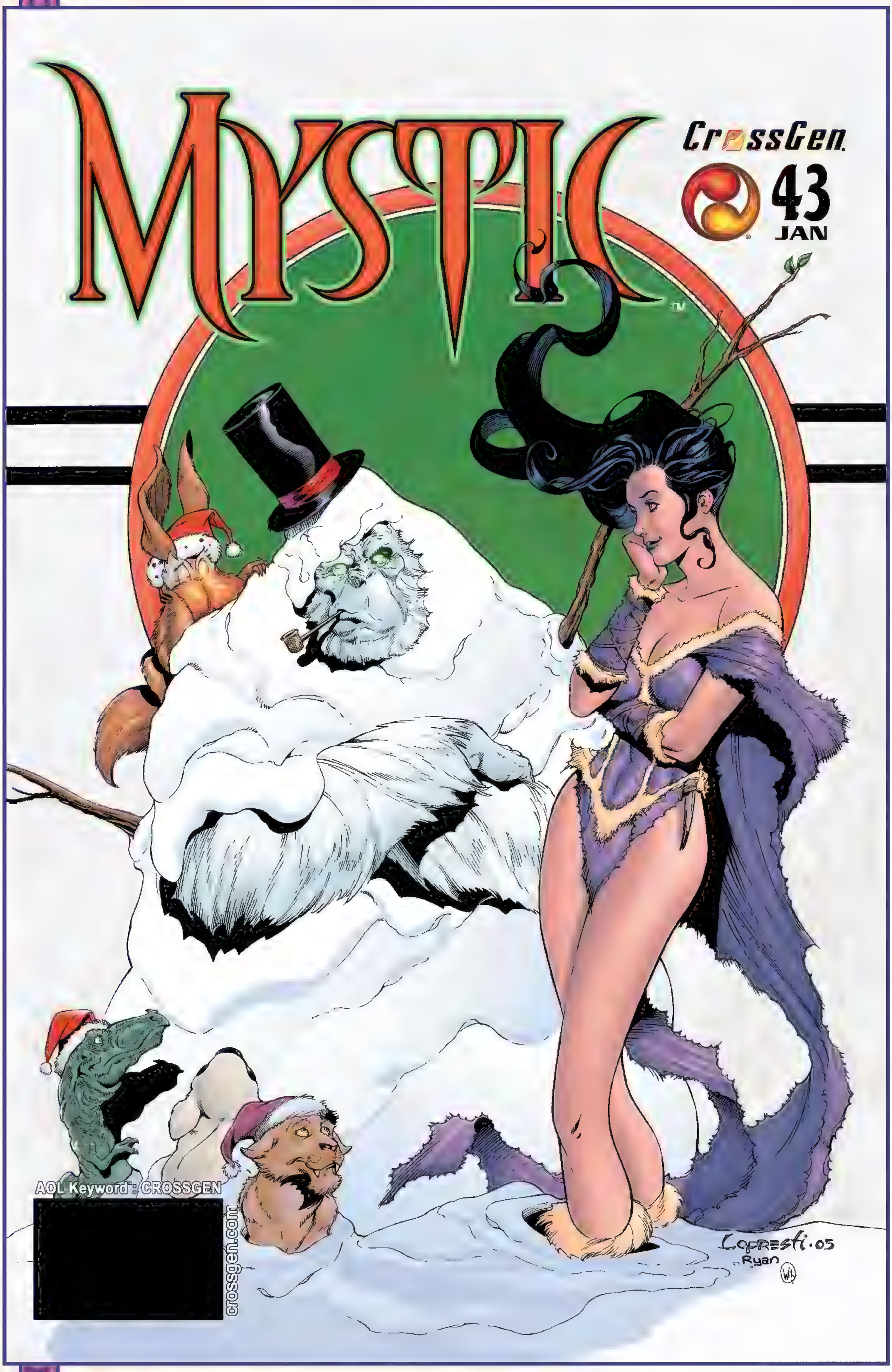
YETI, I'VE *NEVER* BEEN ONE TO LET BRAINS GET IN THE WAY. STILL...

SKREEEE KRUNCH

DAYWING--!

THUMP

GISELLE, ***NOW*** WOULD BE A GOOD TIME TO GET BACK YOUR MOJO...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Lopresti.05
Ryan

MOVE!

GISELLE! THAT ARTIFACT THE SNOW DRAGON GUARDS IS WHAT KEEPS ALL MAGIC *LOCKED OUT* OF OUR WORLD.

YOU *MUST* FIND A WAY TO *UN*LOCK IT QUICKLY-- BEFORE THE BEAST DEVOURS US ALL!

RIGHT! SO... WHERE'S THE *INSTRUCTION MANUAL?*

SLAM

THUNK

HROOOK!

IT'S NOT WORKING, YETI! I CAN'T FEEL ANYTHING--*WITHOUT MY SIGIL*, I'M USELESS!

THIS IS FOR KILLING MY *PET BAT!!*

DON'T GIVE UP!

SNNIIIIIIFF

LOOK OUT! IT'S GOING TO USE ITS **BLIZZARD BREATH!!**

I'LL TRY TO **SHIELD** YOU! GISELLE, WHATEVER HAPPENS, **DO NOT** STOP TRYING UNTIL YOU **SUCCEED!!!**

WHOOOOSH

YETI!!!

DO NOT *WASTE* HIS SACRIFICE! IF YETI SAYS YOU CAN STILL USE MAGIC, THEN YOU *CAN*!!

...COME ON ...COME ON...

HRAAHRR!

!

YETI!! NO!!

OKAY, OKAY ...THINK... THE GEOMETER GUILD MADE THIS...

...THEY LIKED MIXING MAGIC WITH MECHANISMS...

CHOMP

...WHAT IF THIS WHOLE THING'S A GADGET...

...LIKE THE LOCKS IN THAT DUNGEON THEY THREW ME IN...

KLIK

A-HA!

RRRRNN...?

YES... COME TO MOMMA...

BETTER.

SHIFT

WH...?

WHERE IS ATOOK?!

KRK

ZZZT

POP!

AHHH--
EH?!

O, THANK YOU-THANK YOU-THANK YOU...

TA-DAAA! THE MAGIC IS *BACK!*

THE QUESTION IS, CAN *YOU GUYS* DO MAGIC AGAIN?

LET'S FIND OUT...

LOOKS LIKE THINGS ARE GOING TO BE *JUST FINE* AROUND HERE...

WELL, IF YOU DON'T MIND, I'D LIKE TO GO *HOME* NOW AND SEE IF I'VE *MISSED* ANYTHING...

HIYA, SKITTER!

GUESS WHO CAN DO *MAGIC* AGAIN?

Giselle!

You're just in time! We **need** ya, kid!

WHAT *IS* IT, SKITTER? DON'T TELL ME ALL THE SOLDIERS AROUND THERE ARE STILL A BUNCH OF *BABIES?*

WHAT?

I'LL EXPLAIN IN A SECOND.

Worse! The **Dark Magi** knows this land's undefended, and they're **invading!** Your sister's at the border right now, doing what she can, but she needs **help!**

YOU GUYS WANNA *COME WITH?*

DO YOUR WORST, YOU UNDEAD FREAKS!

IS YOUR *MASTER* SO SCARED TO FACE ME HIMSELF THAT HE HAS TO *HIDE* BEHIND A WALL OF *ZOMBIES*?!

WH--?

I HAVE TO *HAND* IT TO YOU, GENEVIEVE VILLARD...

...YOU'VE FOUGHT *VALIANTLY* TO PROTECT YOUR LAND!

BUT WITH YOUR ENTIRE ARMY TOO BUSY FILLING THEIR *DIAPERS* TO BACK YOU UP, YOUR *DEATH* IS ONLY A MATTER OF--

FWASH

--eh...?

=OOF=

COME, ATOOK! LET US *VITUPERATE* THESE UNHALLOWED TRANSGRESSORS!

TRANSLATION: "*LET'S* ***KILL*** *THESE STIFFS* ***ALL OVER*** *AGAIN!*"

Oh, MAGUS... WHEN WILL YOU LEARN NOT TO MESS WITH THE *VILLARD GIRLS...?*

GISELLE!!

I'LL INTRODUCE MY *FRIENDS* IN A MINUTE, GEN!

RIGHT NOW, LET'S DO SOME *WORLD-SAVING!*

SHRIEK

SO *THIS* IS WHAT A THOUSAND SHAMBLING CORPSES *SMELL* LIKE...

Cut the wisecracks and just **fight,** Giselle!

'sides, **I'm** the one who brings the funny around here...

STEADY...

...STEADY...

SNATCH

♪THANK YEWWW...!♪

EEE!

HE IS... BUT ONE... WE ARE MANY...!

POK

POK

POK

YOU WERE SAYING...?

BASE *VILLAIN*, YOUR *RECKONING* IS AT HAND!

FILTHY *BEAST!*

DAYWING, *LOOK OUT–!*

EEE!

SO YOU CAN STILL WORK SPELLS, EVEN *WITHOUT* THE SIGIL?!

JUST RUNS IN THE *FAMILY*, I GUESS!

A FAMILY THAT HAS NOW REACHED THE *END OF ITS LINE!*

THE TWO OF YOU AND YOUR SUBHUMAN *ALLIES* CANNOT STAND FOREVER AGAINST THE MIGHT OF MY *ENTIRE NATION!*

BUT *FEAR NOT:* ONCE YOU ARE DEAD, I SHALL *ADD* YOU TO THE RANKS OF MY REVENANTS!

Kid, I'd better bail yer pretty butt out of this one!

DON'T YOU *DARE*, SKITTER!

IF ALL THIS COMES DOWN TO IS *SHEER NUMBERS*, THEN I'M CALLING IN *MY OWN* REINFORCEMENTS!

YOU MADE *MORE* FRIENDS BACK WHEREVER IT IS YOU DISAPPEARED TO?!

SORT OF! YETI'S WORLD IS *FILLED* WITH JUST THE RIGHT KIND OF TROOPS FOR THIS BATTLE!

TO *WHOM* COULD YOU POSSIBLY BE REFERRING, GISELLE?

HINT: THEY'RE *BIG* AND THEY'RE *GREEN*... AND, *MAN,* ARE THEY *MEAN!*

FWASH

RRROARR!!

RRARR!!

RUN!

RUN FOR YOUR...

...YOUR...

...AH, NEVER MIND...

WHAT TRICKERY IS *THIS?!* DRAGONS NEVER RUN IN *HERDS!*

THIS ISN'T *OVER,* YOU WITCHES! I'LL HAVE MY *VENGEANCE,* IF IT'S THE LAST THING I DO...!

FASH

THOSE DRAGONS LOOK A BIT... *STRANGE.*

THEY'RE NOT EXACTLY *DRAGONS,* GEN.

THEY ARE *DINOSAURS,* AND YOUR MAGIC IS GREAT INDEED, GISELLE, IF YOU MANAGED TO PLUCK TOGETHER *SO MANY* FROM MY WORLD!

YEAH...

...THE POOR THINGS ARE PROBABLY SCARED AND CONFUSED RIGHT NOW. THE *LEAST* I CAN DO IS TO LET THEM GET A GOOD *MEAL* BEFORE SENDING THEM BACK...

WELL, THAT'S THE LAST OF THEM, GEN...

...I ONLY HOPE YOU GUYS DIDN'T HAVE TOO BAD A TIME RELIVING YOUR CHILDHOOD!

THERE'S NO WAY I'D WANNA REPEAT MINE!

I TRIED EVERY SPELL I KNEW TO TURN THEM BACK INTO GROWNUPS. HOW'D YOU DO THAT ON THE FIRST TRY?

IT JUST CAME *NATURALLY*, GEN. HEAVEN HELP US IF I ACTUALLY HAD TO *THINK* MY MAGIC THROUGH...

FASH

YOU EXPECTING *COMPANY?*

NO. THIS *COULD* BE AN ATTACK...

I, uh...I'M SORRY FOR *POPPING IN* LIKE THIS, BUT...

HEY! HE'S GOT A *SIGIL*, TOO!

MY NAME'S *SAMANDAHL REY*. I'M FROM A SOLAR SYSTEM A LONG WAY FROM HERE.

I HOPE THIS DOESN'T SOUND TOO CRAZY, BUT OUR WHOLE *UNIVERSE* IS IN DANGER, AND I NEED YOUR *HELP*.

I, ah... NO. NO, THAT *DOESN'T* SOUND SO CRAZY.

CONSIDERING SOME OF WHAT I'VE BEEN THROUGH LATELY, *NOTHING* SOUNDS CRAZY ANY MORE.

THEN YOU'LL JOIN OUR FIGHT?

Go, kid. This is what you've been preparing for all along.

I'LL COME BACK AS *SOON* AS I CAN, GEN. TRY NOT TO *WORRY* TOO MUCH ABOUT ME, OKAY?

I *WON'T*, GISELLE.

NOT ANY MORE.

LOPRESTI • RYAN '03

STORYTELLERS

Tony Bedard
WRITER

Aaron Lopresti
PENCILER

Rob Hunter & Jennifer Cross
INKERS

Michael Atiyeh
April Quintana & Justin Thyme
COLORISTS

Dave Lanphear
LETTERER

Dear MYSTIC readers;

This is the final issue of MYSTIC. It is not, however, the end of Giselle. If you're wondering where she's off to at the end of this issue, you can follow her further adventures in the pages of NEGATION WAR in March.

It's been a good ride since I took over the writing reins from original MYSTIC scribe Ron Marz, and I've had a great time working with Brandon Peterson, Fabrizio Fiorentino, and my good friend Aaron Lopresti. In this day and age, 43 issues is a nice, healthy run, and we close the curtain on MYSTIC with a feeling of pride and accomplishment.

So if you've enjoyed reading this series half as much as I've enjoyed writing it, then I'm so glad you joined us for the magical trip. See ya' in NEGATION WAR!

-Tony Bedard

The CrossGen Universe created by Mark Alessi & Gina M. Villa

CrossGen Primer, a promotional one-shot released with ***Wizard #103***, featured teasers and character information for CrossGen's first four titles: ***Mystic***, ***Meridian***, ***Scion*** and ***Sigil***.

Jam cover by **Brandon Peterson**, **John Dell** & **Andrew Crossley**; **Joshua Middleton**, **Dexter Vines** & **Michael Atiyeh**; **Jim Cheung**, **Don Hillsman II** & **Caesar Rodriguez**; and **Ben Lai**, **Ray Lai** & **Andrew Crossley**

Mystic section from ***CrossGen Primer***
By **Ron Marz**, **Brandon Peterson**, **John Dell** & **Andrew Crossley**

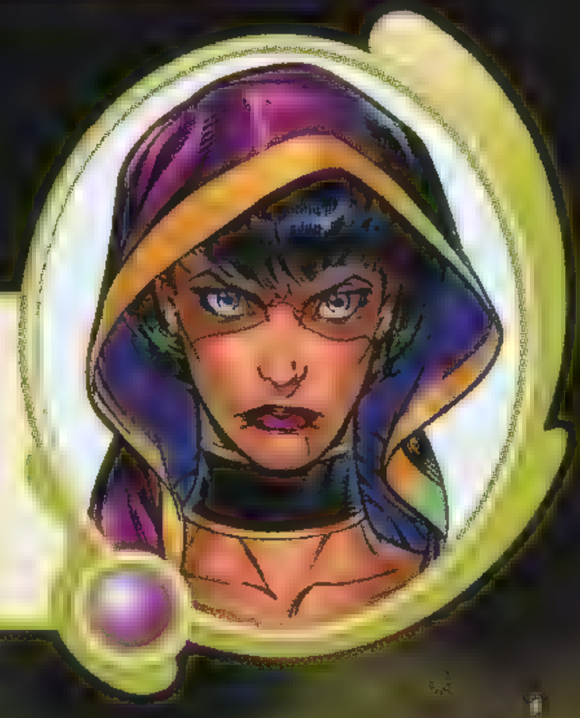
MYSTIC™

Giselle

Carefree and uninterested in all things magical, she's about to undergo a transformation making her the most powerful Mystic her world has ever seen.

Genevieve

Giselle's older sibling, responsible and driven, poised to reap the reward for her dedication until it's all unwittingly snatched away by her sister.



Thierry

Scruffy and a bit rough around the edges, his primary passion is his art, but he may find a new love in Giselle.

Darrow

A mysterious, suave stranger who appeared only recently, garnering Giselle's attention and perhaps her affections.

Skitter the Squit

A furry familiar for Mystic, which reveals itself to be anything but an ordinary pet.

CrossGenesis #1 cover by **Brandon Peterson**, **Dexter Vines** & **Andrew Crossley**

In ***CrossGenesis #1***, the mysterious beings who created the Sigils view the worlds of ***Mystic***, ***Meridian***, ***Scion*** and ***Sigil***. This promotional story was repurposed into short prologues that ran in the first issue of each title.

The first two pages of ***CrossGenesis #1***'s ***Mystic*** section were reprinted largely intact in ***Mystic #1***, except for slight dialogue changes and an altered background planet. However, the last two pages were skipped entirely.

THEY CAN. YOU CAN START ALL OF IT AGAIN. YOUR SIGIL-BEARERS WILL DO IT FOR YOU: YOU JUST HAVE TO PROVIDE THE SPARK. REACH OUT, FIND THE ONE SOUL MOST ATTUNED TO YOU, THEN IGNITE IT!
The notion is intriguing...

Mystic pinup from ***CrossGenesis #1***
By **Brandon Peterson**

Giselle casts a spell in Mystic

Welcome to the world of Ciress, where magic reigns supreme. Literally.

A planet where magic is an everyday occurrence, Ciress is ruled by a handful of Guild Masters representing the dominant schools of sorcery. Each Master serves as a living receptacle for the Guild's eternal spirit, safeguarding vast arcane knowledge handed down from generation to generation.

MYSTIC introduces us to Giselle Villard, a young woman far more concerned with the party life than life's responsibilities. Giselle has little interest for all things magical, despite being born into a family with long-standing Guild connections. But her life changes forever when a mysterious sigil is inexplicably imprinted on her hand, causing Giselle to accidentally strip the Guild Masters of their mystical might. It's power she doesn't want, power she can't control.

'...it's not supposed to be me!' -- Giselle

And the sudden chorus of voices in her head isn't helping.

The confused Giselle will be beset by numerous adversaries, chief among them her own sister, Genevieve. Poised to become a Guild Master herself, and already resentful of Giselle's indolent attitude, Genevieve has her lifelong goal within her grasp, only to see it snatched away. Will she be her sister's lone ally, or will she betray Giselle to the other Masters, who will stop at nothing to get back what's rightfully theirs?

Giselle must come to grips with wielding enough sorcerous power to one day protect her entire world. She just has to survive long enough to learn how.

MYSTIC ships the first Wednesday of each month.

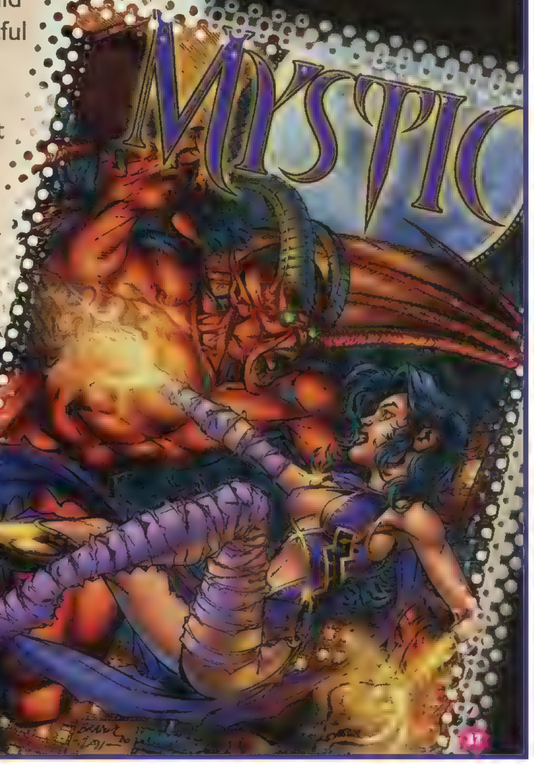
FAQs from www.crossgen.com

How many magical Guilds are there?
There are seven major Guilds, each dedicated to a specific branch of magic: Nouveau, Dark Magi, Astral, Djinn, Shaman, Tantric and Enchantress.

Who is older, Giselle or Genevieve?
Genevieve is the older sister, helping to raise Giselle after their parents perished in an accident.

Will Giselle have a love interest?
Actually, two suitors will vie for her affections: a scruffy artist named Thierry and a suave, mysterious stranger, calling himself Darrow.

What exactly is a squit?
Far more than it appears to be, but that's all we're saying for now.



Mystic promotional article from ***CrossGen Chronicles #1***

MYSTIC™ CREATIVE TEAM

Leaving a promising career in journalism upon discovering his editors generally frowned upon making up stories, Ron began writing comics, where making up stories is pretty much a necessity. In the decade since, he's written such titles as Superboy, Silver Surfer, Star Wars Tales, StormWatch and X-O Manowar. Ron's probably best known, or most notorious (depending on your point of view), for his work on Green Lantern, co-creating the new Green Lantern, Kyle Rayner. He's also been fortunate enough to have written numerous intercompany crossovers, including DC vs. Marvel, Dr. Strangefate, Batman/Aliens, Green Lantern/Silver Surfer and Batman/Tarzan. Now he's crossed over to CrossGen, where he writes the monthly titles Mystic and Scion. Ron dedicates this issue to his son, in whom he sees the magic of the future.

Brandon "Brandu" Peterson is an eight-year veteran of the comic book industry. A versatile artist, he has gained most of his reputation as a talented penciler, though he has worn the hats of writer, inker and colorist at various times in his career. His first series work was for Marvel Comics on the Uncanny X-Men and X-Men books. Later, he was hired by Top Cow Productions, where he spent the majority of his career working on titles like Cyberforce, Codename: Strykeforce, Ripclaw, Cyberforce Origins, Medieval Spawn/Witchblade and his creator-owned book, Arcanum. Just prior to coming to CrossGen, he returned to Marvel Comics' X-Men family, working on books like X-Men: Magneto War and Astonishing X-Men. Brandon will utilize his artistic experience to help design and coordinate the [illegible] that will capture the imaginations of a new generation of fans. Brandon is penciling Mystic, the [illegible] title of the CrossGen Universe.

A thirteen-year industry veteran, John [illegible] worked for [illegible] publisher, starting at AC Comics and moving most recently to DC Comics on their best-selling title JLA. John's work has appeared in Birds of Prey, KIN, X-Men, and [illegible]. He has also worked on numerous covers, logos, posters and trading cards for Marvel, Dark Horse, WildStorm and Top Cow. He now works for CrossGen in the [illegible]. John dedicates this book to his parents, John and Linda, [illegible], his wife [illegible] and their children, Tyler and Ashley, who make him proud to be a dad!

Prior to coming to CrossGen, Andrew worked as a coloring assistant to Top Cow colorist J.D. Smith. Andrew's keen eye for colors can be seen in the pages of Witchblade and Spirit of the Tao. His work currently enhances the pages of the book you hold in your hands – Mystic. Andrew dedicates this book to his [illegible] lady, "for putting up with this insane passion of mine."

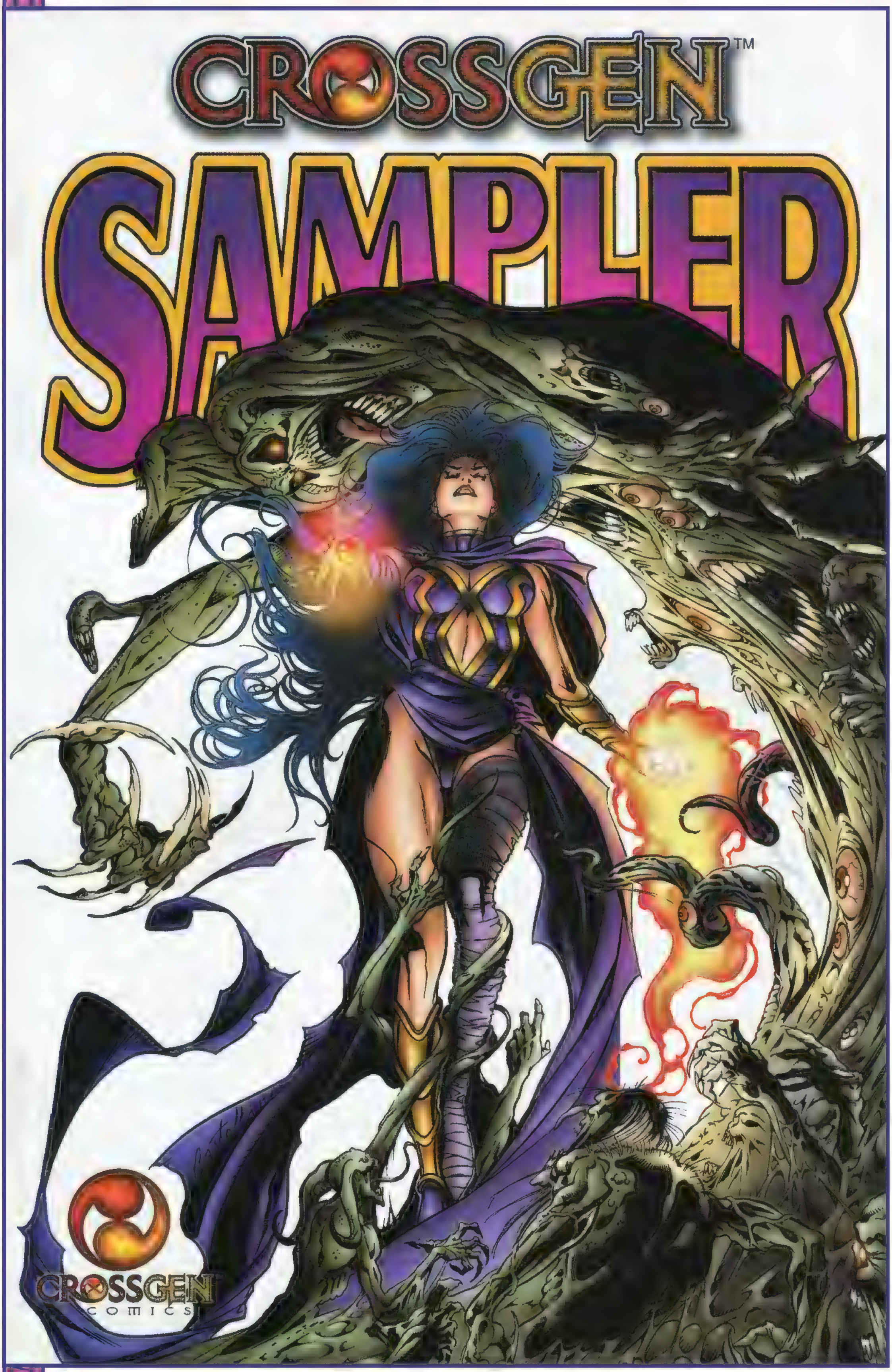
Dave's professional career began in 1985 when he joined two California newspapers to draw their illustrations and cartoons. Three of his cartoons won collegiate and California editorial cartooning awards. In 1990, he broke into comics as a letterer. In 1993, he joined Malibu as an in-house artist, lettering and inking on dozens of titles. In 1994, he joined Comicraft and designed logos, drew fonts, developed lettering styles and lettered approximately 17,000 pages on many popular comics. Dave dedicates this CrossGen book to his loving family: "My Mom for being such an inspirational artist, Dad for being my fan, Tera for her friendship and humor, my wife Natalie for her unflagging energy and support, and Grandma Terri for reassuring me that joining CrossGen was a good idea... without her advice, I might never have moved cross-country, and Natalie and I may never have met!"

Creator biographies from ***Mystic #1***

Steve McNiven

is CrossGen's first Associate Penciler, a program designed to search out new talent and hone it to a fine professional finish. This piece, a street scene from MYSTIC, is Steve's first published work. It was inked by Dexter Vines and colored by Andrew Crossley. Look for more of Steve's artwork in future CrossGen issues!

Mystic #1 pinup by **Steve McNiven**, **Dexter Vines** & **Andrew Crossley**



CrossGen Sampler #1 cover by **Claudio Castellini** & **Michael Atiyeh**

Life is magical on Ciress: work, play, politics — everything revolves around the study and practice of sorcery. Seven Major Guilds rule its lands, with a smattering of Ancillary Guilds filling in the geographic and political landscape. Here, the extraordinary is ordinary, and miracles are commonplace, thanks to the rich supply of universal energy that can be tapped by Ciress' magicians and made into wonders.

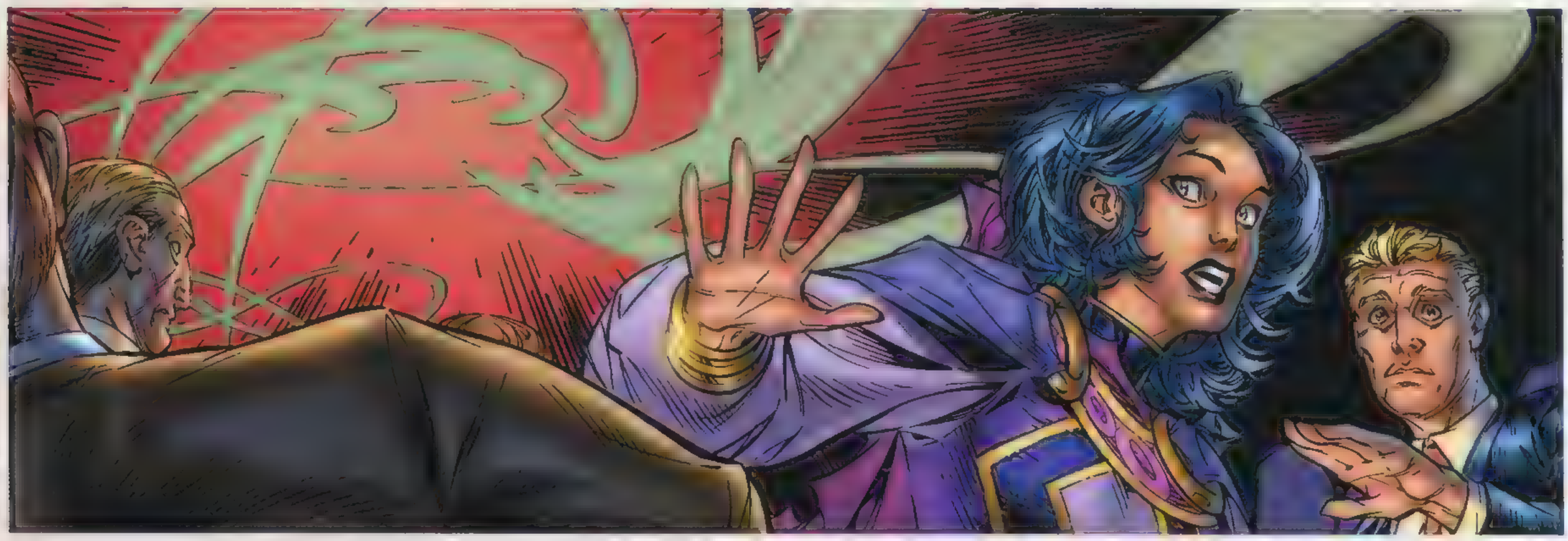
But Giselle Villard isn't interested in magic.

A magical battle is what killed her parents, so she wants none of it. All she wants is a party. So Giselle cruises the social circuit. To the fury of her older sister Genevieve, Giselle insists on acting as irresponsibly as possible.

Genevieve is poised to become the Nouveau Guild's next Guild Master. A dutiful adherent to the teachings and practices of Nouveau magic, she was long considered an ideal candidate. Her consummate skill and tireless dedication won over even her fiercest rival, Elaine Robicheaux, who left for the unaffiliated Territories rather than force a direct competition between herself and Genevieve.

Genevieve's Day of Ascension arrives. Each Guild Master houses the eternal

CrossGen Illustrated was an art book with chapters spotlighting each CrossGen title.
Mystic section commentary by **Barbara Kesel**



spirit of their Guild, keeping them connected to the Guild's history and wisdom. At the Ceremony of Ascension, Gen is due to become the new receptacle for the spirit of Alain LeCavalier, but that ceremony goes mysteriously awry...

...because of Giselle.

Or, more exactly, the mark on Giselle's hand. The Sigil. It appears shortly after she is congratulated by an unusual orange-eyed wizard. When the ceremony is at its height, with the other six Guild Masters in attendance, the Sigil's forces interfere with the transference of Alain's spirit so not only his but *all seven* eternal spirits are drawn into Giselle, transforming her into Ciress' most powerful being, a true Mystic.

The seven eternal spirits now find themselves trapped inside the last vessel they would have chosen and unable to escape the spirit plane. Giselle finds she can access their knowledge of magic and their experience in crafting spells but is subjected to their advice in how to utilize both. Then there's the squit, an unusual orange-eyed stray that adopts her. Skitter (as she names him) also talks, often guiding Giselle toward encounters or saving her from her own inexperience. One such encounter involves a struggling artist named Thierry Chevalier and his pet gork, Alphonse. Gorks usually chase squits, but *this* squit will turn the tables.

Thierry and Giselle's romance is on the verge of blossoming when Darrow enters the picture. A suave yet dangerous character sporting a ring that matches the red side of Giselle's sigil, Darrow takes a definite and controlling interest in Giselle. He appears to know much more than she about how to master the power given to her from the mark on her hand and seems very eager to give her advice and guide her every action.

What he doesn't tell her is that he is a member of the First sent by his leader Ingra to spy on the Sigil-Bearer. One of Ingra's former lovers, Darrow has fallen from grace.

The other Guild Masters, angered at the loss of their spiritual advisers, arrange to trap Giselle, willing to kill her if necessary to return to them what is rightfully theirs. Genevieve is torn, angry at Giselle's taking what was hers but unwilling to put her sister at risk. A demon is sent to bring Giselle to the Sanctum of the Masters. She would happily have given up the spirits... but she can't. Some force keeps them bonded to her. Between them, the power given to her by the sigil, and a little assistance from a certain talking squit, she escapes the Sanctum, but Genevieve is left prisoner.

Giselle returns to confront the masters and rescue her sister. In the ensuing battle Giselle banishes the six warring Masters from their base on the third moon and takes it as her own, complete with its cavernous storehouse of

magical artifacts and a mysterious statue, the unidentified artifact of a long-ago owner who predates the Masters. This leaves the only threat to Giselle now Darrow, who wants much more from Giselle than she's planning to share: her power and her life. He hopes to use Giselle to win back the favor of Ingra. Giselle thinks she's falling in love when she's only falling under his spell.

In a last-ditch effort to defeat Giselle the misguided Masters release Animora, the most powerful evil their world has ever seen. Known to them as the Demon Queen, Animora is also a member of the First. Banished to Ciress by Ingra centuries ago for the sin of daring to challenge the leader of House Sinister, Animora — to her perpetual humiliation — found herself captured and locked away by mere mortals. She is eager for revenge. Darrow decides his future looks brighter if he teams with Animora, so he changes allegiances. The two attack Giselle, burying the Mystic beneath the rubble of the Nouveau cathedral...

...but she rises.

Betrayed and battered, through sheer necessity, Giselle has accessed a more fundamental power: pure universal energy, minimally shaped by the patterns of magic.

The seven Guild Masters desperately try to restrain Animora, but the Demon Queen is too powerful. Giselle's sigil allows her to steal enough power from Darrow to weaken him and from Animora to allow her to be recaptured then banished to the same spirit plane where she spent centuries as a prisoner. To keep up political appearances, Giselle allows the Masters to claim credit for the capture.

After brokering the agreement between Giselle and the other Masters, Genevieve assumes her rightful place as Nouveau Master, acquitting herself admirably in fulfilling her duties. She has everything she's always wanted...

...except the guy her sister's dating.

Giselle and Thierry have made up for lost time. Giselle's brought Thierry to her new Sanctum to apologize, and he's brought her into his studio to do her portrait...

Then Darrow arranges for Animora's release, and Giselle's about to be caught in the fight of her life...

Left and Top Next Page
pencils: Brandon Peterson
inks: John Dell
colors: Andrew Crossley

Giselle blasts apart the gremlins forming a simulacrum of her sister.

ANIMORA

Five hundred years ago, the Guilds were caught up in endless rounds of inter-Guild warfare. It was a time of constant conflict between the Guilds, each vying for supremacy, making and breaking alliances to draw in more adherents with the goal of planetary domination.

This constant conflict was on the verge of tearing Ciress apart.

Then Animora appeared.

Drawn by the rich supply of universal energy surrounding Ciress, she had made her home on the third moon of Ciress while she recouped a portion of her depleted power. Once rested, she appeared to the warring Guilds, announcing her desire to have their world and its resources turned over to her.

The eight Guild Masters joined forces to battle the woman they quickly dubbed the Demon Queen. Finding that they could not overpower Animora, they plotted to ensnare her...at the cost of one of their own.

Bottom Left and Above
pencils: Brandon Peterson
inks: John Dell
colors: Andrew Crossley

Animora is summoned by the Guild Masters.

HOW MAGIC WORKS IN THE CROSSGEN UNIVERSE

The use of magic may seem to differ from the universal energies wielded by the Sigil-Bearers, but they are actually very closely related. In the working of a spell, the magician creates a temporary "lens" for the universal energies, a pattern designed to force energy into a specific task for a specific duration. When the force or time limit is exceeded, the energies are no longer commanded by the spell and are released back into the universal whole.

Above and Right
pencils: Brandon Peterson
inks: John Dell
colors: Andrew Crossley

Above: Even ordinary tasks are extraordinary on a world run by magic.

Right: A message left for Giselle reflects the visages of all the Guild Masters except her sister Genevieve.

Left and Below
pencils: Brandon Peterson
inks: John Dell
colors: Andrew Crossley

Giselle and Darrow take a moonlit stroll along the bay.

GISELLE'S GUYS

A beautiful woman often attracts a bevy of admirers, and Giselle is no exception. Besides Darrow there have been men like:

Patric (who left the Nouveau lands for a year to study with the Djinn Guild, met a girl named Soraya, and never came back) who was there when Giselle was arrested for "borrowing" a sports car for a little joyride.

Willem, the musician more skilled at playing Giselle than the harpsichord.

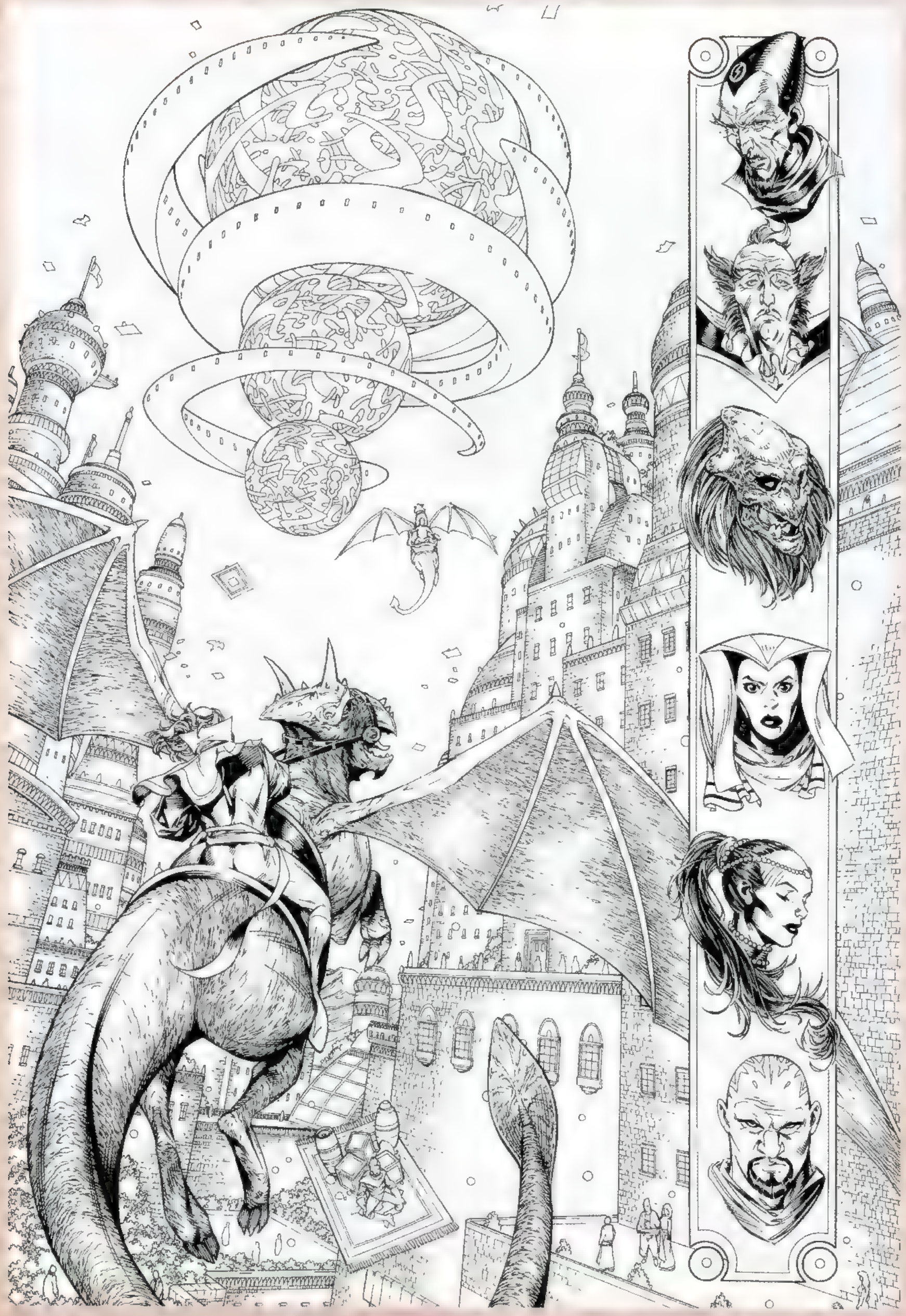
Henri, who made Giselle the *other woman* until a Scrying Service check turned up a marriage certificate...and an angry wife.

And of course, Thierry, who loves the inner beauty he senses in Giselle. What will the sisters think when they discover he's hiding behind a false name?

THE MAGIC GUILDS OF CIRESS

The seven Major Guilds rule most of Ciress. Five hundred years ago the Major Guilds banded together to combat Animora. She was vanquished and imprisoned in a crypt in their sanctum. A measure of Animora's power was usurped by the Masters, allowing them to live on eternally in spirit form. The Guilds operate independently, coming together only for Rites of Ascension or political summits, but a comfortable détente has kept their borders stable. The smaller Ancillary Guilds include: Samedi, Dragon, Protean, Quetzal, Aranda, Sylvans, Mandala, Lotus, Divination, Solists, and Geometers.

The Lost Guilds are:
Taroc, the players of games of chance.
Dimense, travelers of the planes.



THE SEVEN MAJOR GUILD MASTERS

(Top to Bottom)

MAGUS of the **Dark Magi Guild**, practitioners of the blood rites and force-based magics.

MONDRU of the **Astral Guild**, explorers of the power of mind and the astral plane.

ZAI of the **Shaman Guild**, who work the spells through the animating spirits of the world and its creatures.

YINMA of the **Enchantress Guild**, open to women only, they seek benign control using artifacts and totems.

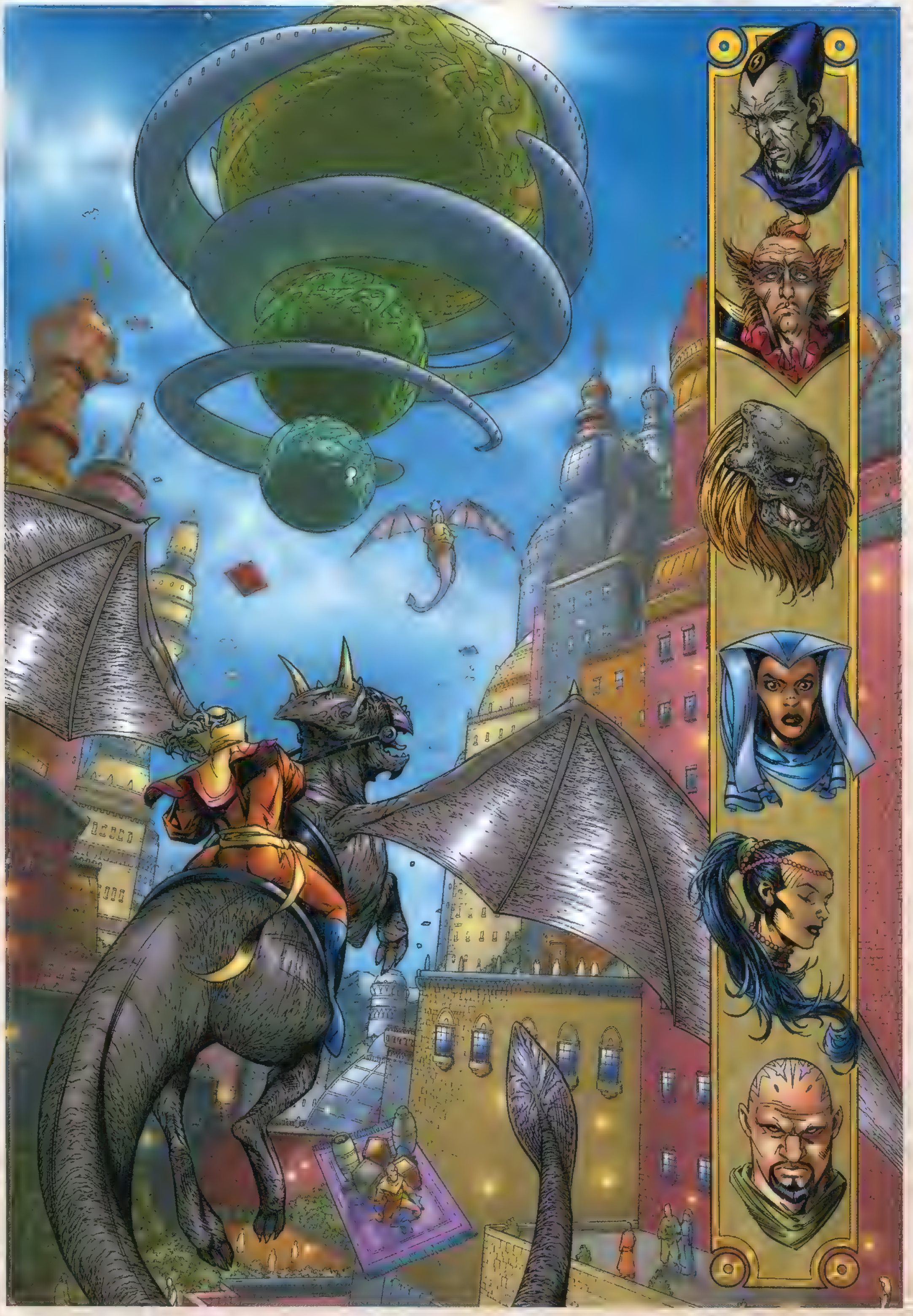
VASHUA of the **Tantric Guild**, creators of energy through the perfection of the body and the sharing of its pleasures.

ATYAAH of the **Djinn Guild**, masters of the ancient elemental forces.

Not shown:
GENEVIEVE VILLARD of the **Nouveau Guild**, who strive to perfect the magic of beauty.

Left and Right
pencils: Brandon Peterson
inks: John Dell
colors: Andrew Crossley

The cathedral of the Astral Guild.



Left and Right
pencils: Brandon Peterson
inks: John Dell
colors: Andrew Crossley

Giselle reflects on the events of her recent past.

BAD GIRL?

Giselle's a girl with a good heart and bad reputation. She has a flair for provocation and a cutting style born of boredom. A disdain for magic and a trust fund large enough to discourage work have left her without a purpose in life beyond looking for the next happening. She's a social butterfly with a field that ranges from the penthouses to the flophouses — wherever the party lingers.

But that was Giselle *before*...

GOOD GIRL

Now, armed with the mark of power and a responsibility reinforced by the ghostly voices of the eternal spirits, Giselle is leaving behind her flighty ways and taking on the responsibility of protecting Ciress. Soon she will be called upon to take an even bigger role in a universal struggle — she will discover others who are also branded by the Sigil and will have to fight by their side — even if it means leaving her home unprotected by the Mystic.

Left
pencils: Kevin Sharpe
inks: Jason Baumgartner
colors: Richard Isanove

The Mystic in action.

Ron Marz passed the torch to CrossGen's newest writer, Tony Bedard, with MYSTIC #18. With the new regular penciler Fabrizio Fiorentino and inker Matt Ryan coming on board with February's #21, you can look forward to changes in the look and feel of the series.

So what can we expect from the new regime? According to Bedard, "MYSTIC is definitely heading into some darker territory. It has an interesting world and a protagonist who is complex but has feet of clay. There's a lot to work with there! And because Fabrizio has this very moody, intense visual style, he's given me a great opportunity to explore the darker side of Giselle and her world.

"I've been through some pretty bleak and hard times myself, and I found that that's when you really learn who you are. The best that's in people comes out of the worst circumstances. So we're going to put Giselle through the wringer. We're going to put her on the road to becoming an adult and living up to the potential that earned her the sigil in the first place."

Look for MYSTIC #18 in stores now.

Mystic promotional article from *CrossGen Chronicles #5*

TONY BEDARD

"Giselle had power handed to her on the proverbial silver platter. Now she'll have to work to prove that she's worthy of it."

Conducted by CrossGen's guest interviewer: Jen Contino

On the world of Ciress, wielding magic is as common as breathing. So, Giselle using magic is somewhat of a norm. Giselle accidentally absorbing all the powers of Ciress' most powerful Guild Masters, then not being able to tell anyone about it for fear of sending the world into utter chaos, is... unfortunate. Getting a chance to talk to Tony Bedard... very fortunate...

CROSSGEN: MYSTIC's not your average costume-clad offering. How's this series different from all the rest?

BEDARD: A lot of comics are about an unusual person in an ordinary world. This book's about someone very much like you and I, living in an extraordinary world where everything is run by magic. And it's the ultimate irony that despite the fact that she couldn't care less about magic, she ends up as her world's greatest magician. It's a fresh twist on the standard comics setup.

CROSSGEN: Giselle never really wanted power, but she's kind of grown into the role of Sigil-Bearer over the past few years. What other growing experiences will she have this year?

BEDARD: Giselle had power handed to her on the proverbial silver platter. Now she'll have to work to prove that she's worthy of it. She'll do that by making a sort of pilgrimage to learn what each of her world's major schools of magic are all about. It's a chance to explore her rich and fascinating world while at the same time giving her more depth of character. But she'll always be a little flippant, a little "too cool for school."

CROSSGEN: What role will the other Guilds play in upcoming stories?

BEDARD: The other Guilds play a big role as Giselle goes from one to the next trying to win the trust and support of each Guild Master. Each one will have its moment to shine, even the Dark Magi Guild. Especially the Dark Magi Guild. If the Guilds give the billions of people on planet Ciress a way of life and a unique world-view, then I'd like to know just what that point of view is. Wouldn't you? Ten million Djinn Guilders can't be wrong!

CROSSGEN: What romance, if any, is on the wings for Giselle or Genevieve? Both don't seem too lucky in love...

BEDARD: For Gen, we have a surprise coming soon. She deserves it. But Giselle needs to work on herself a little more before she goes sharing her life with someone else. That doesn't mean plenty of folks won't be throwing themselves at her!

CROSSGEN: When will Giselle learn more about Skitter?

BEDARD: When Skitter's good and ready! Actually, I'm more focused on what Giselle learns about herself and, in a way, what Skitter learns about Giselle. Skitter is the kind of character that should remain mysterious, at least for the foreseeable future.

CROSSGEN: With Animora defeated, what new evil awaits Giselle this year?

BEDARD: There are plenty of very challenging adversaries to be faced on Ciress, but behind them lurks a more insidious threat that will turn out to be even more dangerous than Animora. It's a threat that even the most powerful among the godlike First is nervous about. Stay tuned. In the meantime, we'll encounter a different foe from each Guild land, each a reflection of that Guild's core characteristics. In other words, a new and very different enemy every month.

CROSSGEN: What's happening in your other titles?

BEDARD: In NEGATION, Kaine and his crew crash land on a Negation world and have to infiltrate the local city. While there, they throw down with the other band of escapees. I'm also writing a horror book drawn by Karl Moline. It will have a very different tone — more character-driven and personal in feel. But with a nasty body count, too.

INSIGHTS

STUDIO™

Tony Bedard interview from ***Mystic #21***

STUDIO INSIGHTS

Written by: CrossGen's guest writer, Jen Contino

On a world where magic rules, it takes a special art team to convey all the feeling and emotion of the cast. Fabrizio Fiorentino and Matt Ryan are two of the creators working magic on MYSTIC.

"There's many challenges to working on MYSTIC," begins penciler Fabrizio Fiorentino. "I have to pay constant attention to the anatomy when I draw, because I want to make all the men and women look realistic. A woman can't be too masculine or weak, the lines have to look right and the figure has to be in perfect harmony."

Fabrizio is constantly seeking to improve his work and enjoys the challenges presented in creating new characters and environments for the series.

"In issue #21, it was really hard to manage the big scaly monster in relation to the buildings and other figures within the scene. I had to constantly check the perspective and make sure things lined up. However, as tough as the monster was to create, I got to have a lot of fun designing the leprechaun who was used in this story. I made him a nasty, malicious, evil, yet sympathetic being. It was a lot of fun to convey the emotion of the character in that manner, but also a little difficult to get him looking just right."

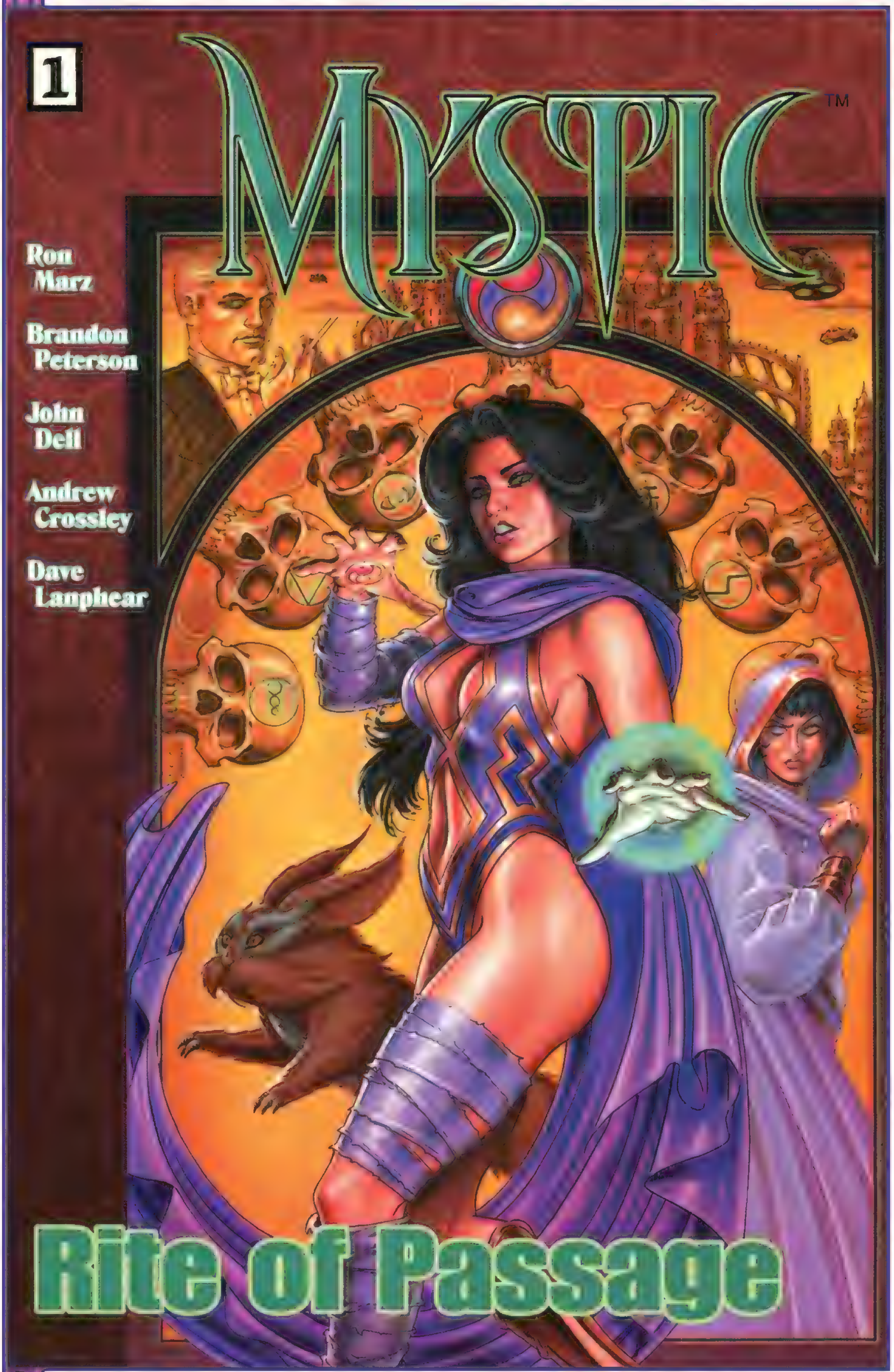
Another character Fabrizio struggled to get looking just right was the guest star in this issue. "One of the First arrives and it was difficult to design a costume and coherent anatomy for a godlike character. I wanted to convey his stature, but still make him appear to be on some kind of level that we could relate to. It was much easier designing the gangster demons from issue #22. They were an outlet for my imagination: nasty guys in three-piece suits, perfectly integrated into Ciress' underworld. Tony [Bedard] gave me the idea and I came up with some *film noïr* type characters."

"Those characters were a lot of fun," comments inker Matt Ryan, who really enjoys the freedom to create within MYSTIC. "There's a lot of room to add special effects and use different techniques when inking to really make a panel or page stand out. With the gangsters, I got to add details to their clothing like pinstripes or textures. I wanted to make their attire look debonair. Besides working on the clothes and contributing to the darker lighting and feel of MYSTIC, I really like inking the trees and other fine details on panels. I pay close attention to all the things Fabrizio's trying to convey and make sure I enhance them, not take anything away from them."

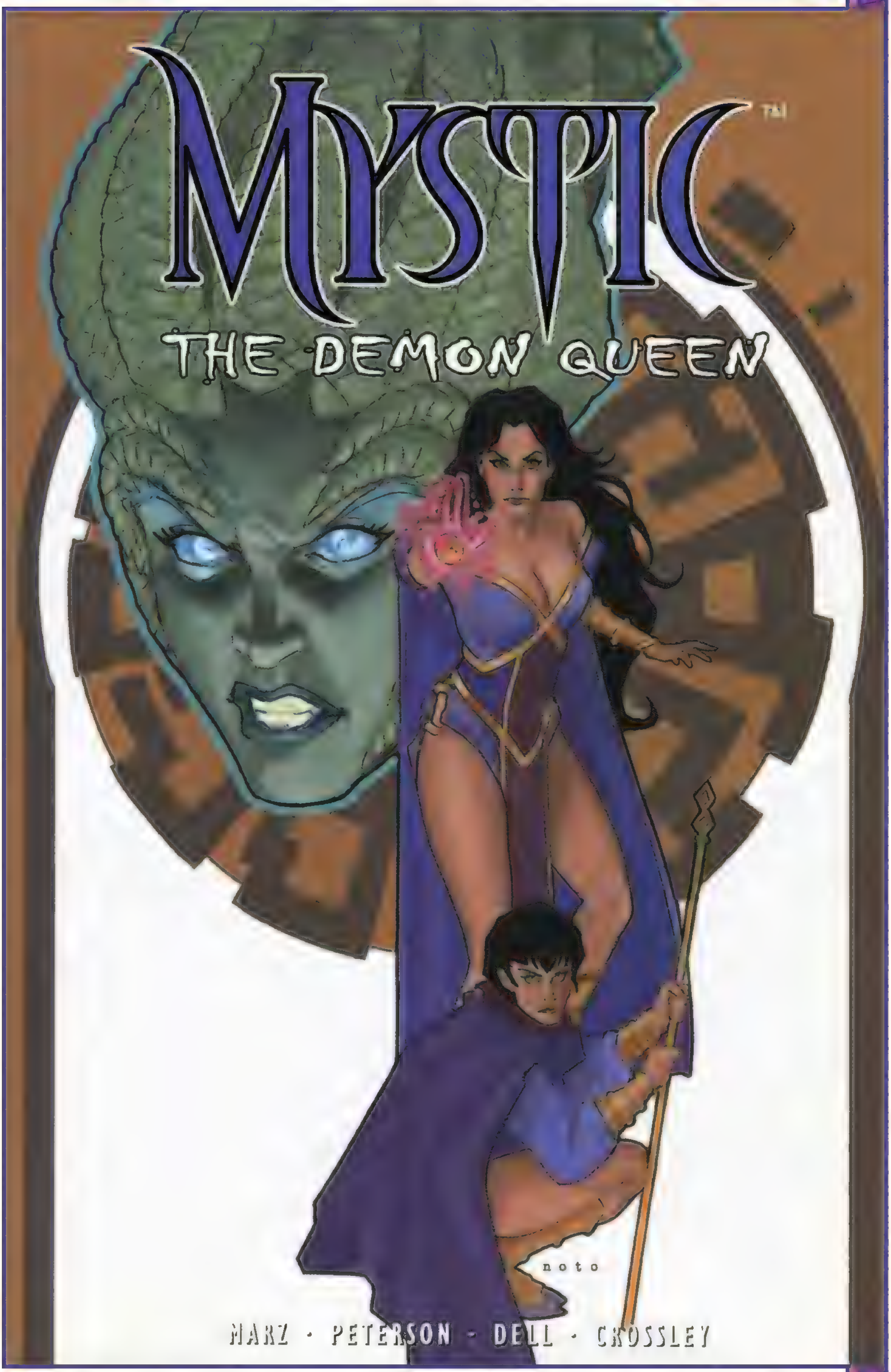
Fabrizio also enjoys the artistic freedom granted him with this series. "MYSTIC is a perfect title for someone wanting to let free his imagination and ambitions, to feel emotions, and to touch the readers, who are the most important for any creator to reach! If we can do that each issue, then we're truly working magic and I'm glad to be a part of that!"

Mystic promotional article from ***Mystic #23***

Wizard CrossGen Special Edition cover by **George Pérez, John Dell & Laura DePuy**



Mystic Vol. 1: Rite of Passage TPB collected ***Mystic #1-7*** and the ***Mystic*** story from ***CrossGen Chronicles #1***.
Cover by **Joseph Michael Linsner**



Mystic Vol. 2: The Demon Queen TPB collected ***Mystic #8-14*** and ***CrossGen Chronicles #5***.
Cover by **Phil Noto**

Mystic Vol. 3: Siege of Scales TPB collected ***Mystic #15-20***.
Cover by **Brandon Peterson**

Comic Box #29 cover by **Brandon Peterson, John Dell & Andrew Crossley**

"Let us watch well our beginnings, and results will manage themselves."
—Alexander Clark

It was hanging on the wall, one part inspiration and one part intimidation. It was a Joe Kubert comic-book cover, art from the Silver Age. I could tell you which one, but it doesn't matter now. All that matters is that after all these years of looking at it — with its incredible composition, classic lines and attention to detail that typified the whole damn reason I loved comics to begin with — that day it meant something more.

It was September 1999, the opening of the CrossGeneration Comics studio. The place was relatively empty. The electrical wasn't finished and you could still smell the dust from all the work the contractors were doing to get the building up to specs. We had already made our initial hires and had a plan to proceed. I had spent the better part of the last two years traveling around the country trying to make myself as smart about the comic-book business as I was passionate about comic books themselves. I spoke with retailers, creators, publishers, fans, journalists — anyone whose ear I could bend. A few people took me seriously, while I'm sure others regarded me as that crazy guy from Florida who keeps buying all that comic-book art. Whenever I talked to people, I'd get these incredulous looks from them, like they thought I was unstable or in need of some medication, some therapy, or a little of both. I can't imagine what made people think that.

Oh yeah, now I remember. I told them I wanted to start a comic-book-publishing company.

"In this marketplace?" was the reply more often than not. "It'll never work. Remember Valiant, Tekno, Malibu, Comico, Now, First, Eclipse...?" The list kept growing. They were all publishers of comic books who arrived with the best of intentions, but couldn't stay in business. Now, I was adding one more publisher to the mix. Would CrossGen just wind up another footnote of a dying genre, or take its place in the lexicon of longer-term players like competitors DC, Marvel, Image and Dark Horse? In September 1999, I knew where I wanted CrossGen's name to be placed, and ask anyone, I can be very stubborn.

So was that Kubert piece. It hung there, reminding me why I started this whole venture at the same time it was reminding me why it would be very hard for me to succeed.

Not to sound like someone's grandfather droning on about better times, but I remember comics when they meant more to people than how much they could sell them for when they got older. I remembered when comics taught us about the difference between right and wrong, about the responsibility the strong have to the weak, about what makes a hero and what makes a villain. And as this almost subliminal education proceeded, I, and thousands like me, were entertained by our generation's *Beowulf*.

But today, a lot of those messages have been lost in a sea of graphic violence and blatant sexuality. Comics and their stories are no longer a source for inspiration and their success is largely dependent upon shock value and sensationalism. Three thousand years of heroic fantasy has taken a backseat to market fluctuations, variant covers, crossovers and the constant killing and reviving and killing and reviving and killing and reviving of characters we used to love, but can't seem to get excited about anymore because they are being treated like disposable commodities. That old piece of art reminded me of a time when a hero didn't have to wear day-glo Spandex. A hero could have been a swashbuckling pirate, a knight astride a white mare, a sorceress from another world, an explorer, or sometimes even a benevolent prince or princess who brings peace to a war-torn land. They didn't need capes, cowls, masks and powers. Sometimes, simply the strength of their own convictions, a little skill and a basic weapon was all they needed.

But just as that drawing reminded me of those days, it also reminded me of how much we had to live up to. Because of all the failures that had come before us, because of all the well-intentioned neophytes who came before us, because of the slippery slope that the comic-book marketplace had become, we would need to be twice as good as anything out there. We couldn't hold ourselves to a basic mission. We had to create one that was above and beyond anyone's wildest expectations, and then we had to succeed. We had to prove we could do the impossible, and do it quickly, because the comics marketplace was an impatient mistress. She wouldn't wait for us to catch up.

For that reason, our first step had to be a good one. Our beginning needed to be strong, definitive, defiant and bold. We needed to draw our line in the sand early. We needed to think outside the box of conventional wisdom and do something so different, that at the very least, it would start people talking about us.

In a marketplace filled with brawny, muscle-bound Spandex jockeys and dark knights and mutants with powers so obscure and abstract that they'd confuse Dennis Miller, we needed a foil. We needed someone who would be reminiscent of the heroes I remembered as a kid, but fresh and lively and new for a new generation. We needed someone who would make the rest of the comics world sit up and say, "Hey, what the heck is going on over there?"

Clearly, this was a job for a woman. Her name is Giselle. I think you'll like her.

—Mark Alessi

When CrossGen launched in May 2000, the goal was to debut with a splash. An initial release of four monthly titles seemed to be the right number, but asking fans to buy four comics to get a taste of a brand-new universe of stories was asking a lot.

Hence, *CrossGen Chronicles #1* offered an opportunity to sample the characters, worlds and stories surrounding *Mystic*, *Sigil*, *Scion* and *Meridian*. The issue featured five-page vignettes respectively showcasing each lead character and storyline. The trick was placing them all within the context of one story, so the choice was made to use the godlike beings of the CrossGen Universe, the First, as a framing device.

It was also decided that the five-page interludes would present the characters just after they'd been granted their sigils, allowing an exploration of how they reacted to those sigils. As far as the timeline was concerned, the sequences would fit between issues #1 and #2 of the individual series. Once the #1 issues hit the stands, perceptive readers would be able to fit together the chronology. Leaving a trail of clues for clever readers to follow would become a CrossGen hallmark.

"We used the five pages to show a bit of the fallout between Giselle and Genevieve, which is really the low point of their relationship," *Mystic* writer Ron Marz said. "The whole thing forms a really nice bridge."

Here it is, presented "in sequence" for the first time. ■

CrossGen Chronicles #1 article from ***Mystic Vol. 1: Rite of Passage TPB***

MYSTIC™ ART TEAM (or Odd Quad)

Brandon Peterson

Growing up stuffed with dairy products in Wisconsin, Brandon dreamed of drawing characters like X-Men, Witchblade, and Spawn. Soon he found himself drawing them in comics, until CrossGen offered him some magic beans for his cow. Now he spreads his time between penciling MYSTIC, acting as Art Director, and cheesy humor.

John Dell

It was an inky black night gashed with liquid frisket stars. He stepped from the cross-hatched shadows. "Name's John Dell. I'm an inker. I ink MYSTIC. Done the same in the past--you may recall the lineup: JLA, Lobo, Kin, Birds of Prey. Got a sweet wife and a couple of kids. I like music, but just to listen. No dancing."

Andrew Crossley

Andrew realized he couldn't draw, ink, write, or impersonate Elvis, so he decided to fake his way through coloring with the help of drugs, booze, and a well-worn copy of "coloring for Dummies." So far he has everyone fooled...Sssssshhh! Don't tell anyone! He's not paranoid! Where are those snakes coming from?

Mystic art team biographies from ***CrossGen Chronicles #1***

MARZ ATTACKS!

Chronicles contained the first display of the power Giselle inherited. The ironic thing was, it wasn't supposed to be Giselle. Originally, *Mystic* was going to star her sister Genevieve as a gifted sorceress who is granted the power of the sigil, as well as the power of all the Guild masters, to become the heroine for the title.

But then, Marz attacked. *Mystic* scribe Ron Marz, to be exact.

"As originally envisioned in the bare-bones CrossGen 'bible' that Mark (Alessi) and Gina (Villa) had put together, Giselle was essentially Genevieve (though no one had names at that point)," explained Marz, who was one of CrossGen's first staffers. "The original vision of that book was to have someone like Genevieve as the protagonist — someone magically adept and who always wanted to pursue a higher position within the world's magical hierarchy. But when we all sat down to have our brain-storming sessions for developing the CrossGen Universe in detail from Mark and Gina's guidelines, I suggested building the book around a character who was in many ways the exact opposite of what was envisioned. I thought it would be much more interesting on a character level to saddle someone who didn't want all this magical power with the burden of carrying it."

Using Giselle, a character who had absolutely no preparation for power, heroism or responsibility — let alone the desire for it — as the lead character, allowed Ron to employ a lot of themes very close to his and CrossGen founder Mark Alessi's hearts: coming of age and coming to responsibility.

"Certainly that sense of coming to responsibility was present, because we started with an inherently irresponsible character," Ron said. "We started with a party girl, and we're slowly building her into this sorceress supreme. It's very easy to build a character who is dutiful and proper and self-confident into a hero. You don't have as far to travel. But with Giselle, we have a great foundation for character growth against this epic backdrop."

The world Ciress, introduced in the previous chapter, was built to a great extent around the things *Mystic* penciler Brandon Peterson draws well, according to Ron.

"The function followed form in this case," he added. "We built a world that took advantage of the strengths Brandon had displayed earlier in his career. The art nouveau motif is something Brandon was familiar with and excels at, so that's what we used as a base design. Then when you go to other places on the world, places where the other Guilds hold sway, we used different design sensibilities. It gives us the opportunity to play with a wide range of visuals and still create a coherent world."

The most fun for Ron in the first issue, though, was coming up with all the Guild Masters, their looks and their specialties.

"For me, the thing that made it all come together was designing the Guild Masters," he said. "That sort of tied together the whole world. Even though they were just character designs, coming up with them made the whole world seem that much more fleshed out to me. With most comics the creative team is essentially asked to conform to what already exists or to fill a market niche, as opposed to being asked to create from the ground up. In this sense, *Mystic* was definitely more the exception than the rule." ■

WHOLE NOUVEAU LOOK

Mystic penciler and CrossGen art director Brandon Peterson knew that *Mystic*, as the company's first monthly title, had to be different and daring, so he approached everything about designing the look and the characters of *Mystic* differently than he had with his other comic-book work. The fact that he was even involved in some of those decisions was different in itself.

"I had a unique advantage in that I was involved in the original character-creation meetings," Brandon said, sitting in a small office in CrossGen's studio. He had just finished penciling issue #11 of *Mystic*, so he had more than a year's time invested in drawing stories with Giselle and her friends (and enemies). He remembered the meetings he had with CrossGen founder Mark Alessi and *Mystic* scribe Ron Marz during which they hammered out the details of how *Mystic* would look. "Initially, one of the first visual ideas I had was an image of some magical 'other-earth' from some time in history. As we batted the ideas around, we decided we really liked the feel of 1920s Paris. When we decided that was going to be the feel of the book, the rest of the pieces fell into place pretty easily."

The easiest decision was Giselle. The team knew she had to be an attractive young female, but that didn't necessarily put her into very elite company in comics. Comic books are loaded with attractive women. Brandon knew he needed to make her different.

"We decided the lead was going to be a looker, but what kind of looker was she going to be?" Brandon remembered. "We didn't want her to look like just a swimsuit model. She needed to be pretty, yet subtly powerful — not muscular, mind you, but strong of will and intent. With that in mind, we went about designing her along those lines."

It was also decided that *Mystic* would start out partially as a story of sibling rivalry, with Giselle's sister Genevieve being a primary part of the cast. Visually, it's very difficult to portray two females in the same comic book. In many comics, most of the women look exactly the same, except for hair color and clothing. Giselle and Genevieve had to be distinct, but not too distinct since they shared the same gene pool.

"We wanted to show her sister in contrast to her," Brandon said. "Genevieve needed to bear a resemblance to Giselle, but still display a definite contrast. We started with the same hair color, but distinctly different styles. Giselle was a free spirit, very daring, so her hair was long, windswept and wavy. Genevieve was the studious, responsible sister, so her hair was short and practical. It was stylish, but clearly low-maintenance. Their fashion sense was also different, as Giselle leaned toward more revealing outfits, Genevieve wore the traditional robes of her mystical Guild. Very dutiful and proper."

Designing the other characters was fun and challenging at the same time, Brandon remembered.

"For Darrow, the initial love interest, we used a classic reference, artist J.C. Leyendecker. He did a series of ads for Arrow Shirts many decades ago, and they were images of this prototypical blond-haired blue-eyed society boy," he said.

And for the general design of the book, Brandon didn't borrow much from the world of comic books at all. Instead, he borrowed from the world of classical art.

"The look of *Mystic* is heavily based on illustration from the early part of the 20th century," Brandon said. "I'm a big fan of art nouveau and the look of France, which is partially where the Nouveau Guild of magic came from. All the sweeping curves, the very graceful movement of the art, the fact that there are a lot of small design elements in the artwork, is all because of the art nouveau influence. But our biggest challenge in the book visually was to lay out the story in an interesting way throughout the seven issues where there wasn't necessarily a lot of action going on. We decided to use an illustrative, decorative style as opposed to a lot of action like *Superman*, and art nouveau helped us reflect that sensibility. With some drawing pains early on, I think we achieved what we set out to do." ■

COMICS ON THE SIDE

By issue #4, *Mystic* had turned the world on its side. Okay, actually, it only turned its own world on its side.

The start of issue #4 begins with the reader having to hold the book on its side for the first couple of pages, and then the panels actually rotate and correct their orientation by the end of page 3. Why?

It started with a phone call that *Mystic* penciler Brandon Peterson made to Ron Marz one weekend.

"He called me up at home and said, 'Hey, I have this idea I've been thinking about.' Neither one of us are big fans of the sideways spreads you sometimes see in comics. Anything that pulls you out of the comic and makes you turn the actual book is a storytelling failure. But in this case, starting the book on its side with the panels actually rotating to orient the book properly again, seemed like it fit."

The unusual layout was meant to jar the reader, since the opening sequence took place on the spirit plane, home to the eternal spirits of each Guild. It was also a chance to try something new by literally turning the world on its ear, a freedom that keeps Brandon and the art team of inker John Dell and colorist Andrew Crossley excited about *Mystic*.

"The biggest attraction for me from the beginning has been that there weren't any preset parameters," Andrew said. "Everything was black and white when I got it — and with the help of Brandon and Mark [Alessi], I've been creating the color scheme for every new character from scratch. That's the big difference between this and the other projects I've done."

While Andrew knew early in the process how exciting working on *Mystic* would be, it took John Dell until after the first issue was printed to get the joke.

"It took me a while to find my feet, because I had never inked anyone like Brandon before," John said.

"When I got my first copy of #1, tip of the hat to production, it rocked. When I'm working on a page, I don't really *see* the work when I'm doing it. When it's printed, and I see all the pieces together, that's when it really works for me. When I get to look at it all inked and colored and printed and lettered, that's when I enjoy it the most. When I saw that first finished issue, that's when I knew it was good. That's when I knew I could send it out into the world and let other people look at it." ■

IN*DELL*IBLE INKS

For *Mystic*'s John Dell — a veteran inker whose previous assignments included a critically acclaimed run of DC's flagship title *JLA* — *Mystic* was a homecoming. Of sorts.

"I grew up reading sci-fi and fantasy novels and comic books," Dell remembered. "But the only comic books I could find were superhero comics, so I figured those were the only kind that were made."

Once he became a professional in the industry, John found himself in the proverbial catbird seat, having been given one of the most plum assignments in comics: DC's revival of the Justice League of America, reduced to its acronym, *JLA*. This was the super-hero team that housed all of DC's icons — Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, the Flash, etc.

"*JLA* was a blast," John said. "It was every big gun DC had, and they said, 'Here's every toy we have — go play with them.' And let me tell you, that will kill an artist. They had so many things going on at once it was hard for me to even see the page sometimes."

Mystic, however, brought John back to those fantasy books he read as a youngster.

"I think if CrossGen had said straight out that they wanted me to ink a magic and mysticism title, I probably wouldn't have been into it at first," he confessed. "I was into the mainstream, but somewhere during the inking of the first issue it made me think, 'Wow, I remember this stuff. This is what I remember liking besides super-hero comics.' It awakened a passion in me that I had forgotten. With *Mystic*, I'm able to focus on the characters, and I've gotten a lot more into the characterization than I did with *JLA*. I can go into Ron's office right now and scream 'What's next? What's next?' and he'll tell me if I threaten him with tickling or blunt trauma. But I have to resist that temptation, because now I want to find out when the book is finished. It's more fun for me that way. Now, I'm enjoying the work I'm doing on *Mystic* as much if not more than the super-hero stuff. I'm thinking that super heroes are what you like when you're a kid. *Mystic* is a bit more grown up."

Something else that's more grown up is the book's art nouveau influence, drawn largely from the team's enjoyment of Alphonse Mucha's work from the early 1900s.

"The Mucha element — it's fantastic — I was looking at Mucha in high school," John remembered. "I love that. The more of that the better. I love the design elements, because they add a unique flavor to the characters and their surroundings. It gives Giselle a sense of place, even though she's not quite established herself yet in her new role."

Another difference for John is the lush sense of detail in *Mystic*'s backgrounds. The cityscapes, the interiors and exteriors all help Brandon and John create a world that looks more real than most comic books.

"First off, I'm anal-retentive, so I'll spend nine hours doing hair, and not necessarily because I *like* to, either!" John said. "I love the backgrounds, almost more than the figures. I like rendering the soft organic things — the clothing, the soft anatomy, but I'm a nut for background detail. I like to keep the figures simple and make the environment as real as possible. I'm silly that way." ■

COLORFUL CHARACTERS

Ciress is a world of magic, governed by the greatest sorcerers alive. But without the efforts of Andrew Crossley, Ciress would be a pale, barren world of magician wannabes, because as colorist of *Mystic*, Andrew's the man with the magic. Instead of using line art to denote the physical manifestation of the magic spells woven on Ciress, the team decided to make use of the computer technology now available to colorists like Andrew in order to portray how magic looked on Giselle's world.

The results were, well, magical.

"When I think of magic, I see it as something that pops out from the rest of the image," Andrew explained. "If it were done with line art, it would look too much like part of the primary image. With the spells portrayed through the use of colors, it makes them look more like an otherworldly presence, like it doesn't belong there on that plane of reality."

As a result, penciler Brandon Peterson doesn't draw the spells onto the original art boards, but simply leaves space for them. Working in concert, Brandon and Andrew create and place the effects-heavy spells.

"We're not limited by a line drawing," Andrew said. "I wanted to be free to try out new things, and with the computer's capabilities, I really had a very rich palette to choose from."

As a colorist, Andrew has worked with paints and markers, but now uses the computer as his main coloring device. Contrary to popular belief, the computer actually does not do anything "automatically" to the pages. In fact, most comic-book colorists who use computers work with a pen-stylus against a pressure-sensitive pad. Andrew views the computer simply as an extra tool, like a brush or a marker, with many more capabilities to achieve a desired effect.

"I used to do some painting, some marker guides, doing the same thing I'm doing now," Andrew said. "It was a lot like coloring with watercolors, and I went right to the computer with that. I took the markers in a certain direction, but then I hit a brick wall and couldn't go any further. Now I use the computer, and it allows me to carry my inspiration a lot further than I ever could before."

Andrew says much of the work he's done on *Mystic* is influenced by fantasy novels he read when he was younger.

"I used to like the TSR books — magic and knights and sword and sorcery and dragons," he said. "I refer to a lot of the stories I read back then and the things I thought were cool. I try to think of those things when I'm doing the page, not so much to mimic what I've read, but rather to try to figure out why a particular spell is being used. What is it doing? What effect is it having?" ■

GUILD BY ASSOCIATION

From the very beginning, the world of Ciress was going to be governed by magical Guilds representing a wide variety of mystical disciplines. The team assigned each Guild a symbol, a key color and some basic characteristics. Directly from the notes of Mystic writer Ron Marz — written in October of 1999 — here are the original descriptions of the magic Guilds of Ciress:

NOUVEAU:
The Guild with which the sisters are aligned, the closest to the overall look of the world.

DJINN:
Picture "Arabian Nights," with genies, etc. Think of the graceful curves associated with Arabian architecture and costuming.

DARK MAGIC:
Black robes, shaven pates, the kind of look we've come to associate with the darker, spookier aspects of magic. The look here should be as austere and plain as the nouveau look is beautiful. This provides the main opposition to the Nouveau Guild.

SHAMAN:
A more animalistic, earth-tone look. Perhaps masks are part of their regular garb, always concealing the features of the Guild members.

ASTRAL:
Draw inspiration from Steve Ditko's *Dr. Strange* stuff in terms of all those weird design elements. The costumes would be bizarre, the settings reminiscent of Ditko's voids, with stairs hanging in space, floating eyes, etc.

ENCHANTRESS:
A female-only Guild, the thought here is Tibetan, because it has the most alien, exotic quality of the various Asian motifs. But certainly elements of Chinese and Japanese design can be utilized as well.

TANTRIC:
A Guild with a more tantric, sexuality-based brand of magic. Their look should reflect this sexual tone, so maybe this is the venue for an aggressive display of the human body.

Just as Giselle's "costume" consists of the ceremonial garb of her Guild, the other Guild Masters will have "costumes" reflecting the design motif of that Guild. Each Guild will also have a central cathedral as a headquarters, each a grand structure in terms of design and scope. These cathedrals will each have a design in keeping with the overall sense of the Guild as a whole. Think of these as vast, towering structures, huge edifices in which their power — both magical and political — is consolidated. ■

Mystic #7 article from ***Mystic Vol. 1: Rite of Passage TPB***

SPELLBINDING COVERS

Making comic books is fun. Selling them is hard, which is why the cover is one of the single most important elements of the business. With a new comic book from a new company with no track record and high expectations, the cover needs to do everything but sing and dance.

Enter *Mystic* penciler Brandon Peterson.

"One of the things that I decided early on about the covers was that we were going to use a lot of art nouveau, which was popularized in the late 1800s and early 1900s by the Czech-French artist Alphonse Mucha," Brandon explained. "We named Thierry's gork Alphonse as a tribute."

One of the most recognized artists of that period, Mucha painted theater playbill posters, commercial advertisements and a variety of other posters for exhibitions, all characterized by sinuous "whiplash" lines, flowers on thin twining stems, women with long flowing hair and elegantly attenuated lettering.

"His art inspired me to involve decorative borders, very controlled palettes, and a feeling of sweeping motion and beauty, as opposed to the in-your-face dynamics normally associated with comic-book covers," Brandon said. "You'll see a lot of these elements in every cover, including the one Steve McNiven drew for #7. We think we've made it fit very nicely in every cover."

Brandon said his main concern with the first few covers was to establish Giselle as the lead character.

"You need to do that, especially with large ensembles, so that people can identify who the main character is at the beginning of a series," he added. "You have to give the reader an idea of what is inside the issue, without giving away main story points inappropriately. We sometimes don't use the cover image on the inside of the book exactly as it's portrayed, but it always gives the gist of what's inside."

On the very first cover, the main element is, of course, Giselle. She has a very naturalistic pose, showing her sigil with light streaming from it. She has a confident look on her face that is beautiful yet bold.

"We included some images surrounding her as accents," Brandon said. "For instance, her sister Genevieve, in her robes, and the Dark Magi Master as a sinister contrast to that. Even deeper in shadow, we show a mysterious figure, who looks an awful lot like Darrow. One element people don't necessarily notice from the cover is the seven ghostly skulls floating around Giselle in a circle. That is a very art nouveau element that I am very proud of. It's one of those things that may take you a couple of times looking at the cover before you catch it, but once you see it, it adds a lot to the image. The skulls symbolize the seven spirits of the legendary Guild Masters entering Giselle, which is the climax of issue #1."

The last page of the cover gallery features a bonus, a cover Brandon, John and Andrew did for the French comic fan magazine *Comic Box*. It employs many of the same elements Brandon described above. Au revoir! ■

MAKING THE COVER

WITH BRANDON PETERSON

When Ron Marz and I were designing the world of MYSTIC, we wanted to give Giselle and her Guild a distinctive look. For inspiration we looked to art nouveau, a style that originated in Paris and became a worldwide phenomenon by the 1920s. Art nouveau translates very easily to comics because it's a decorative style with a heavy emphasis on line work and flowing shapes and forms. It's also very beautiful.

My favorite artist of this period is Alphonse Mucha (1860-1939), who was one of the originators and masters of art nouveau. Mucha

La Danse by Alphonse Mucha, 1898 (Image #2)

JOB by Alphonse Mucha, 1896 (Image #1)

was primarily a commercial artist who painted for posters, print advertising, labels and packaging. His artwork is reminiscent of cartoons in that he would use bold clean outlines to contain color, so it spoke to me immediately as a comic book artist. I used that influence heavily the entire time I was drawing MYSTIC, and this trade paperback cover is the first time I was able to duplicate more of the pure technique that he and his contemporaries used.

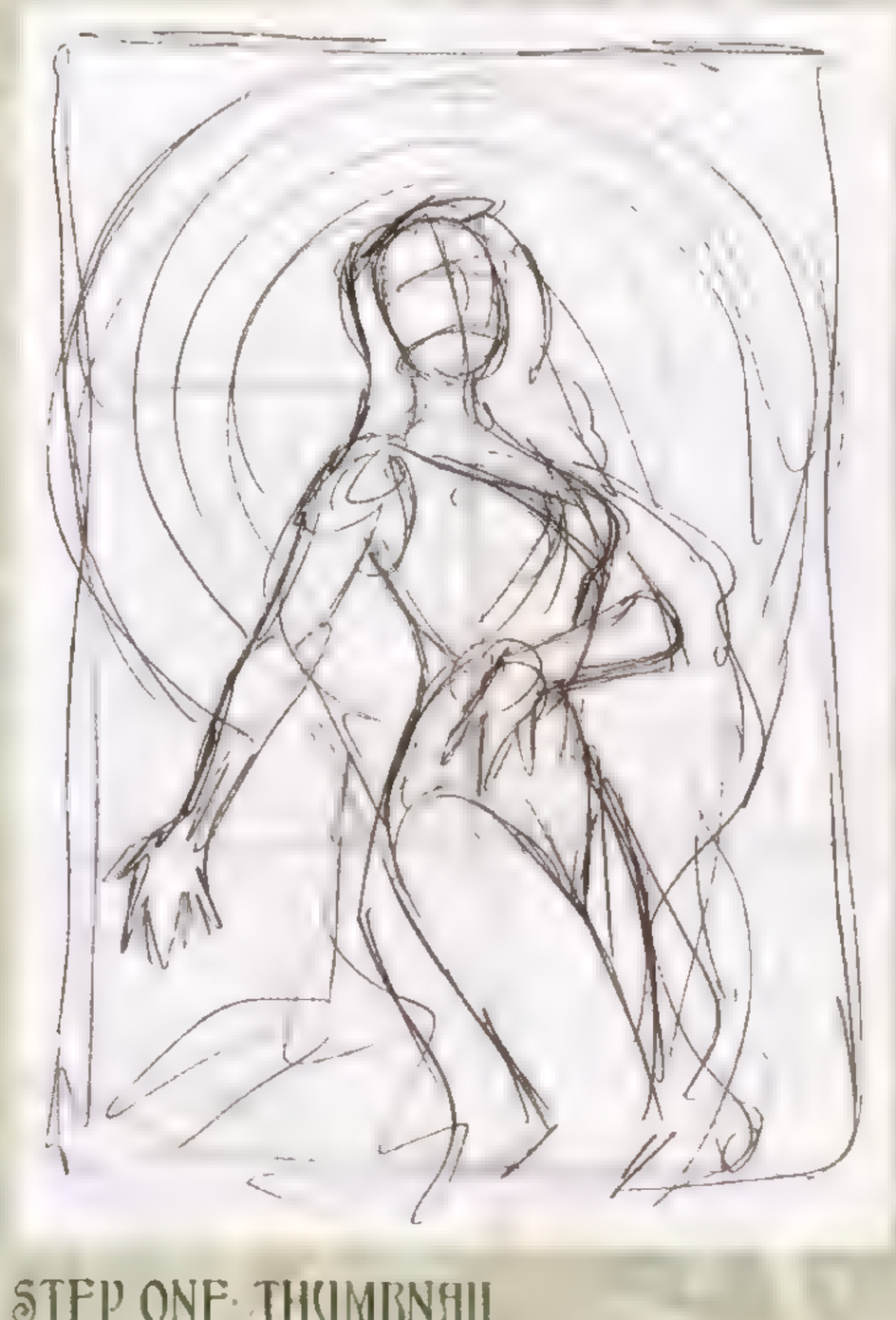
Images #1-#3 are a fairly good example of Mucha's work. The borders are decorative, and this decoration is carried through to the center of the illustration. In fact, the decorative aspects are incorporated within the illustration — instead of being something around the illustration, they're part of it.

One thing I find attractive in Mucha's work is his use of long, flowing lines in hair and drapery. I also like his controlled and muted color scheme. These are aspects of his art that I enjoy but could never bring to the comic. For one thing, Mucha's palette was much more subdued and minimal than what is called for in an adventure comic like MYSTIC. Likewise, you can't use art nouveau decorative techniques in story pages, because they would interfere with the storytelling.

Clair de Lune by Alphonse Mucha, 1902 (Image #3)

Covers are a different story. As this cover was my last MYSTIC artwork, I wanted to go out with a bang by recreating a pure art nouveau piece. The cover is my homage to Mucha. As a result, the color theory, design and even the anatomy of the character is reflective of his style.

I've been working with computers in one way or another since Adobe released Photoshop 1.0. Computers (and Photoshop) have gotten so powerful that it's now possible to "paint" digitally. This is a technique that I'm employing on my next CrossGen project, CHIMERA, which is completely computer-rendered. It was only natural to digitally paint this cover, especially since it's an homage to one of my favorite painters. Here's how I went about it.



STEP ONE: THUMBNAIL

I always start with a small thumbnail drawing of the piece as a general guide. The thumbnail is usually no more than an eighth of the size of the final artwork, maybe three inches high. I roughly block in the major elements, which for this piece are the figure and the background design elements.

It's important to do a thumbnail before just jumping into the actual work. Once you've committed to a piece of art and are doing a finished drawing, it's very hard to think of the piece as a whole. Instead, you think of it in terms of all the little areas you focus on one by one. The danger is that you may lose sight of the whole. There's nothing more frustrating than drawing a wonderful face, and then finding that the face doesn't fit the figure it's attached to! Working from a simple thumbnail keeps your composition strong and balanced.

STEP TWO: LINE DRAWING

When I moved to the pencil stage, I was actually pretty faithful to the thumbnail. What I typically do is take the thumbnail and enlarge it with a photocopier until it is the size of the art board I'm working on for the final product.

Using a light table – which lights up the art board from behind so that I can see the enlarged thumbnail beneath it – I then pencil the finished drawing, making changes on the fly from the underlying sketch. For instance, I brought Giselle's hair forward to balance the picture. It felt like she was leaning too much to the left, so I added more hair to the right of her face to make the figure feel more balanced. I also simplified the background design.

As you flesh out certain areas, it becomes obvious when you step back that other areas need to be refined. You have to remember to step back. The challenge is to not become so obsessed with the individual pieces that you lose the effect they have on the whole.

Some artists start with a very clear image in their head and strive to recreate that with their art. I tend to be more of a constructive artist, which means I build and modify the image I actually see on the paper – strengthening what I like and erasing what I don't – until I have a satisfactory image. I don't have a "final destination" in mind when I sit down to work. I just roughly know I'm heading west, and see how far I can go in that direction.

That's why the pencil stage is the most creative. It's also the freest stage after thumbnails, because the pencil image restricts everything that follows – even in computer rendering, where it's easy to erase.

STEP THREE: UNDER-PAINTING

Below is the under-painting, where I roughed in the color. You rough in color for the same reason you do a thumbnail – balance. I want my colors to work well together and not look garish or fragment the piece. In the end you want to feel that the color works as a whole, which is just as important as making your figures work together in the same space.

The first impression someone sees in a piece of art is how it works as a whole. Then they focus on smaller individual areas. For example, take a look at a house. Is the overall shape and color nice? If it is, then you notice the color of the trim, or how the shutters set off the siding. It's the same with a painting: If you don't capture the viewer's interest with the piece as a whole, they won't notice the small intricacies that eat up the majority of your time!

With the colors that I chose, my goal was to duplicate that muted palette prevalent in much of art nouveau. The colors aren't terribly bright, but they *seem* bright when placed next to other colors in that palette. It works because of how the eye hunts for contrast.

The colors that were determined before I started the piece are her costume colors, which are purples and golds. Thus, I had that limitation when choosing the background colors. I chose complimentary colors of oranges, blues, and greens, because we know from color theory these work well with the purples and yellows of her costume.

One of the biggest identifying features of art nouveau artwork is a fairly de-saturated look. You achieve that by using colors that are not bright and various shades of just a few colors.

You'll notice that there are only three colors on this piece. There's green going from a yellow-green to a blue-green. There's an orange going from a yellow-orange to a red-orange. And then there is purple going from a lighter red-purple to a deeper blue-purple.

One of the things I realized in the under-painting was that the pencil lines I had drawn on certain features of her face were too harsh, so I ended up removing them. That happens sometimes, and it's one of the things I love about painting digitally. It is not impossible to modify something done in an initial step at the end of the process, unlike "real" painting.

One thing that has come about with digital painting is a wealth of filters, modifiers and tools that imitate "real" paint and drawing. It's very tempting to try to use all those tools and show off. I find that I get the best results by limiting myself to one or two filters per piece, as it forces me to concentrate on the final image and not how I get there.

I used primarily the pencil tool (not the brush!) in Photoshop, which gives a harder, more painterly edge to the color. Obviously, I didn't concentrate on precision, because oil paintings aren't precise. Paint mixes in areas unexpectedly and this is part of the charm of working in oil paint.

The working process for a digital painting is similar to the process for a real painting. You usually start with one color that underlies the piece and you build your major areas slowly up from that, sometimes messily, and then focus on refining small areas of detail. As I duplicate this technique digitally, it evokes the feeling of real paint. There are shortcuts, but a computer can't replace an artist's decisions. The work still needs to be done, but instead of a brush you use a mouse (or, in this case, a stylus).

STEP FOUR: FINAL PAINTING

At the point where I begin the final cover, the under-painting and pencils are two separate pieces. Photoshop is software used for image editing, allowing you to extract or combine images. That's what I chose to do, overlaying the pencil on top of the color to create a third image. As I did this, I thought the pencil art dominated too much in certain areas, like in Giselle's drapery. To get around that, I chose to give the pencil art a color, in effect creating purple lines instead of black lines. This blended better with the paint and created a feeling of cohesion.

Computer coloring is traditionally about hiding the tools you use to make the color. Painting, on the other hand, embraces the brush strokes and the tools used to make the final image. So I left in many of my "mistakes" that I could have fixed. They didn't hurt the image, but enhanced the painterly feel of the final piece.

Giselle's face is the focus of the piece because the color lines radiating from her hand center on her eyes, the border has triangles of gold which all point to her face, and her arm and body position create a pyramid with her face at the apex. The lighting scheme in general highlights her face, as the light is from the top and the lower figure diminishes into darkness.

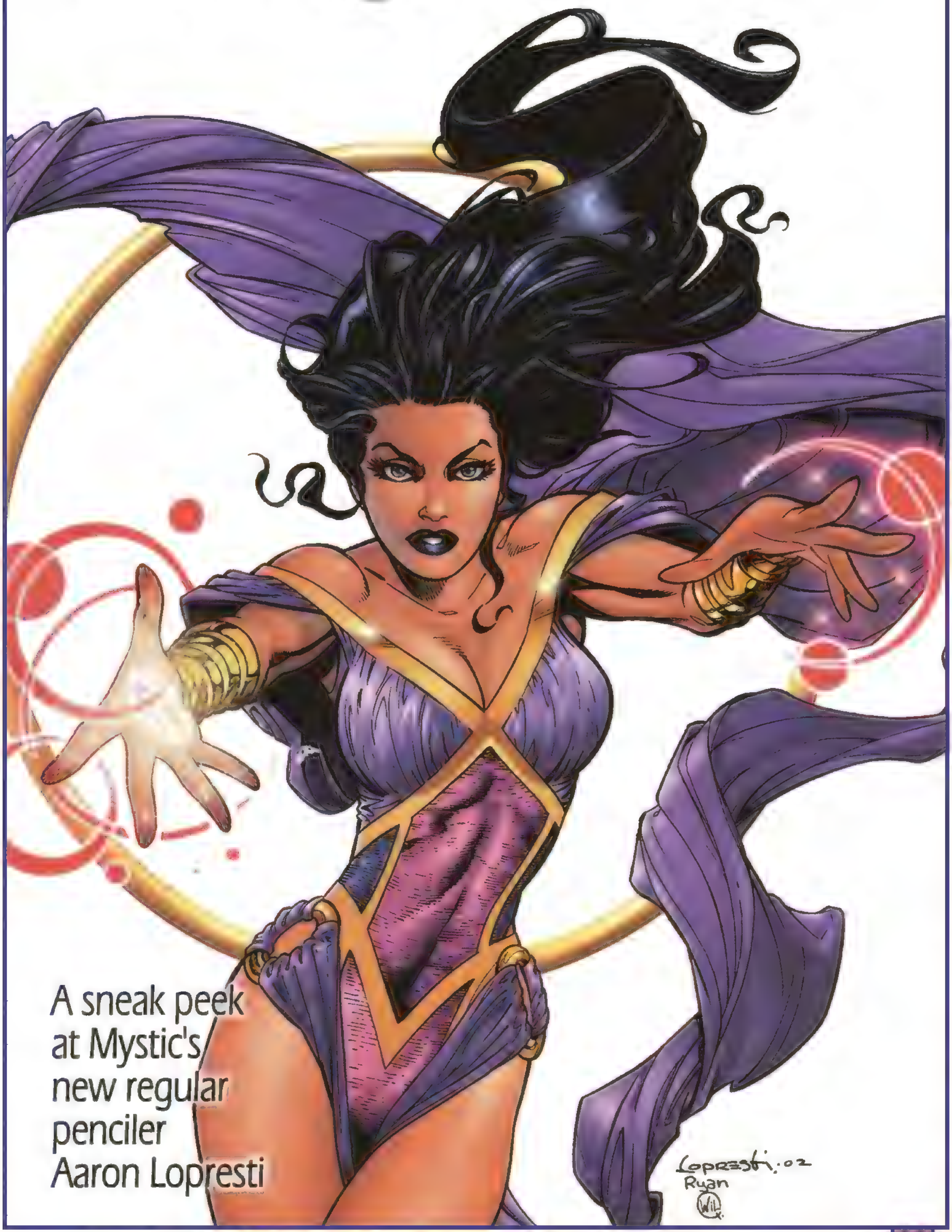
Her face is the area of the highest detail. One of the things you do in art is spend *your* time where people will spend *their* time. They won't notice the tiny tree in the background, but they will notice whether the face of the foreground figure is beautiful. Knowing this, I spent a good portion of my time making subtle color and drawing changes until I felt the face evoked the expression that I was trying to get across.

The art nouveau aspect I ended up duplicating in the piece is a look that many of Mucha's women presented. There is a subtle smile, a certain gentleness, and a look of contemplation in their

faces. They're not overjoyed. They're not angry. They seem to be pleasantly bemused, if not a little melancholy. For Giselle, I lean toward the bemused...

One thing I've learned is that even with comic art veterans there's no such thing as a free lunch. Don't let your tools fool you. Don't think that the tools are going to do the work for you. You still have a job to do as an artist, even with Photoshop. If you wish to achieve a truly painted look, you need to paint the image totally. Yes, there are programs and filters that can take a photograph and modify it so that it mimics a painted appearance, but it is never, ever perfect, it is ham-fisted, and it usually requires more time to achieve a painted look than if you would have painted from the beginning.

A Mystic Future



Mystic Vol. 4: Out All Night TPB article

"Even though my first love was comics, I ended up attending film school at USC. My dreams of directing ended when I got out of school and realized I had no connections! Edit Taco Bell commercials or return to my first love, comics? Comics won. However, I am not so sure the road I chose to travel was any easier than the road I chose not to.

But with my past firmly behind me, I am excited where I have ended up! Not only is CrossGen a great company to work for, but the book I am penciling, MYSTIC, has been nothing but a pleasure so far. Tony Bedard listens to my

ideas, Matt Ryan is doing great work inking me and Wil Quintana is an outstanding colorist. I am in creator heaven! The MYSTIC team is poised to create a comic that just begs to be read and I couldn't be happier to be a part of it."

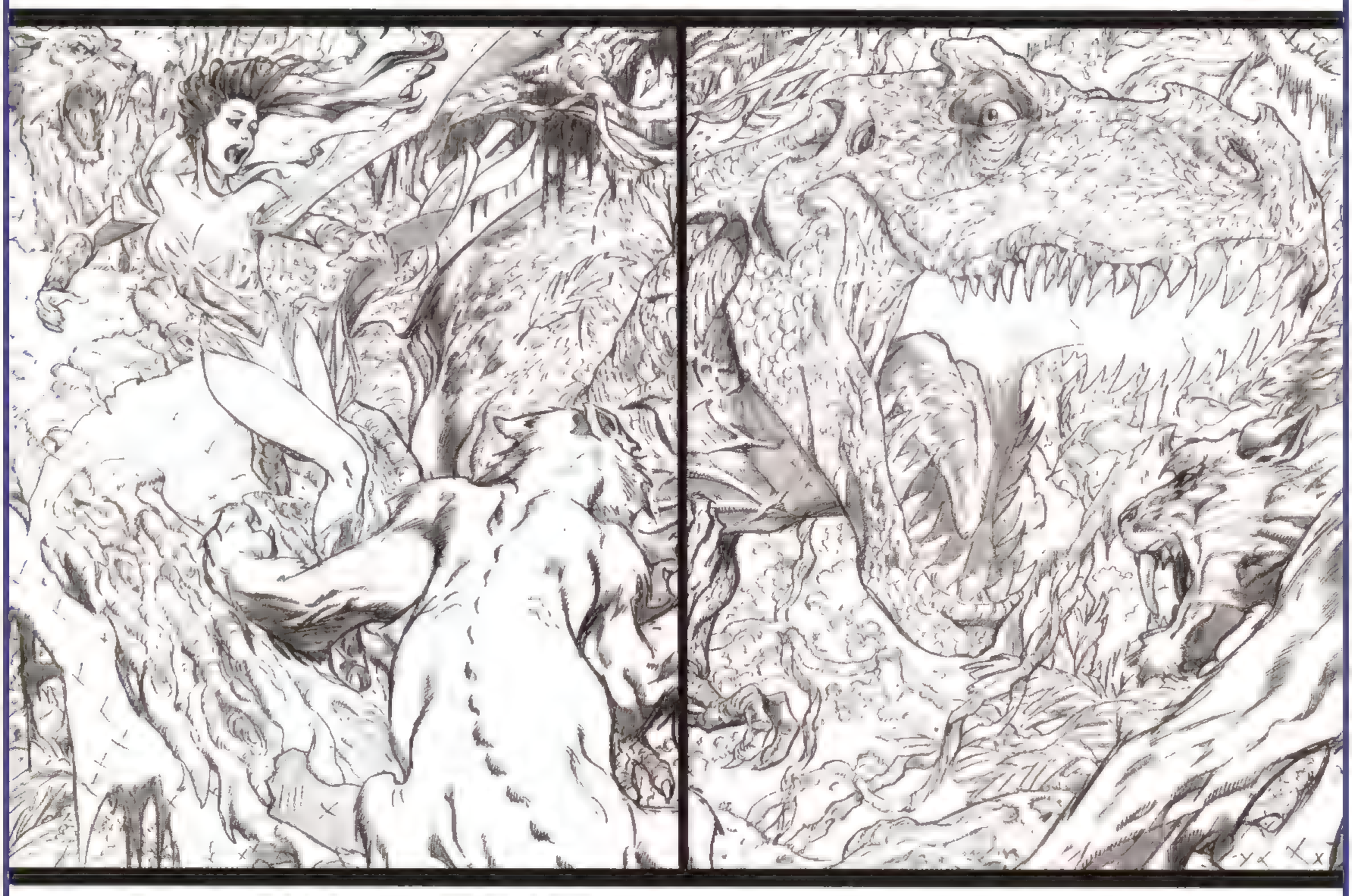
–Aaron Lopresti, Penciler

"As an inker, it is a real blast getting to work with Aaron Lopresti. His style of drawing is a complete 180 degree turn from the approach that Fabrizio Fiorentino took. Fabrizio's style was much darker and moodier, which fit the type of story

that Tony was writing at the time. Aaron's style is all-out fun. It is equally fitting to the new approach in stories that the book is taking. Aaron's art is much more light-hearted, action-packed and just plain fun. I really like how he gets into the

expressions of each of the characters. Everyone in the book has their own personality and unique characteristics. The page layouts and storytelling are also wonderful. I also really like his design work when it comes to characters, creatures, architecture and costumes. Very creative and exciting. The layouts are always interesting and fresh, keeping the reader involved and bringing them into the story.

From an inker's standpoint, Aaron's pencils are very enjoyable to work over. Everything is there that I need, and yet he leaves enough room to allow me to add my own little touches to the artwork. I find it easy to see what he is going



for in the pencils, which makes my job a lot easier. I think it's very important that the whole art team have the same picture in mind when it comes to the finished artwork, and I think we have that on MYSTIC."

–Matt Ryan, Inker

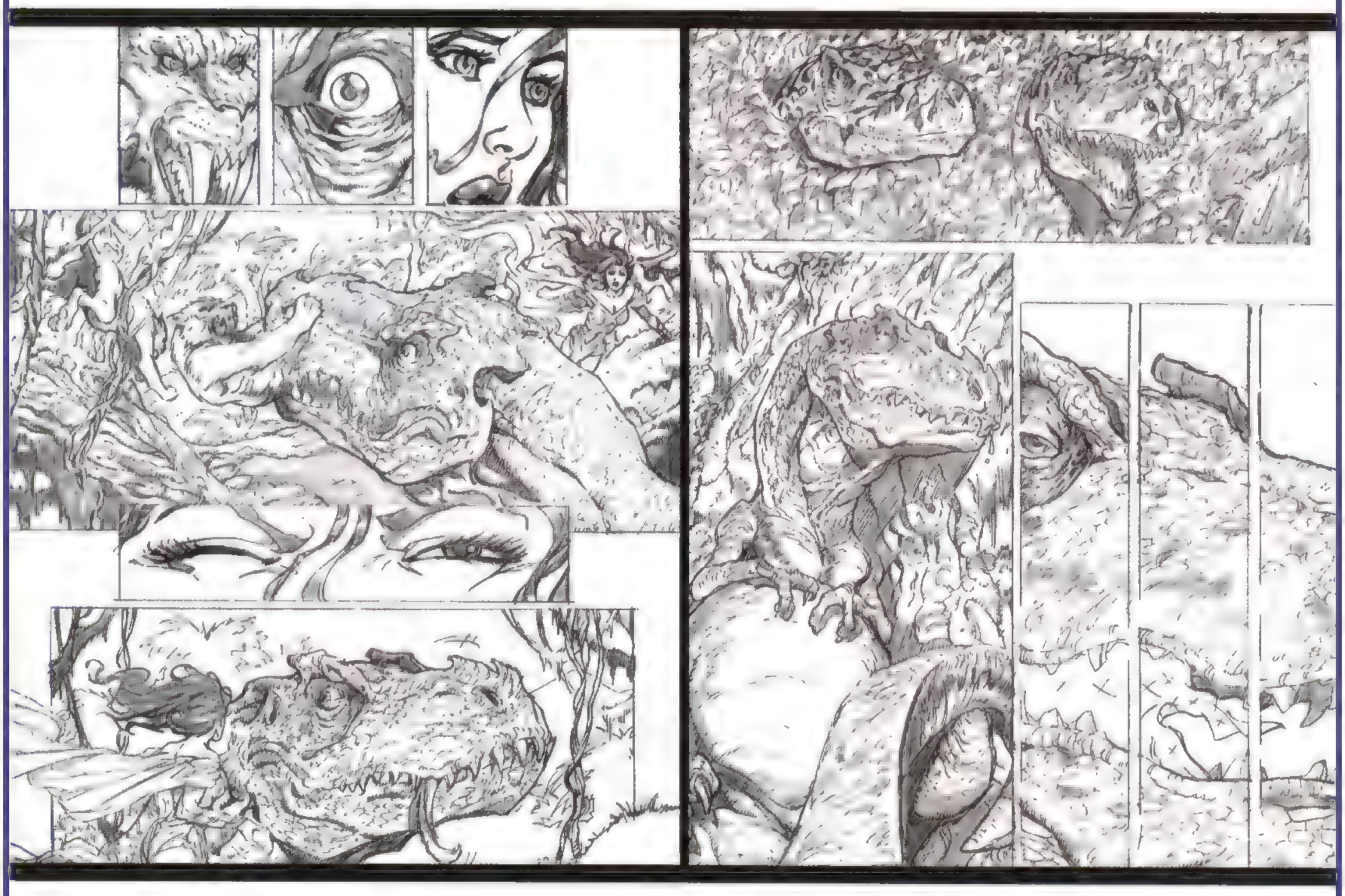
"When I'd first heard of Aaron coming aboard, I was excited at the thought of being a member of this great turning point in the MYSTIC series. I enjoy the opportunity of

coloring the exciting and exotic locations that will be seen in the first few issues of the new story arc, and look forward to seeing what Tony, Aaron, Matt and myself can whip up in this new era for Giselle."

–Wil Quintana, Colorist

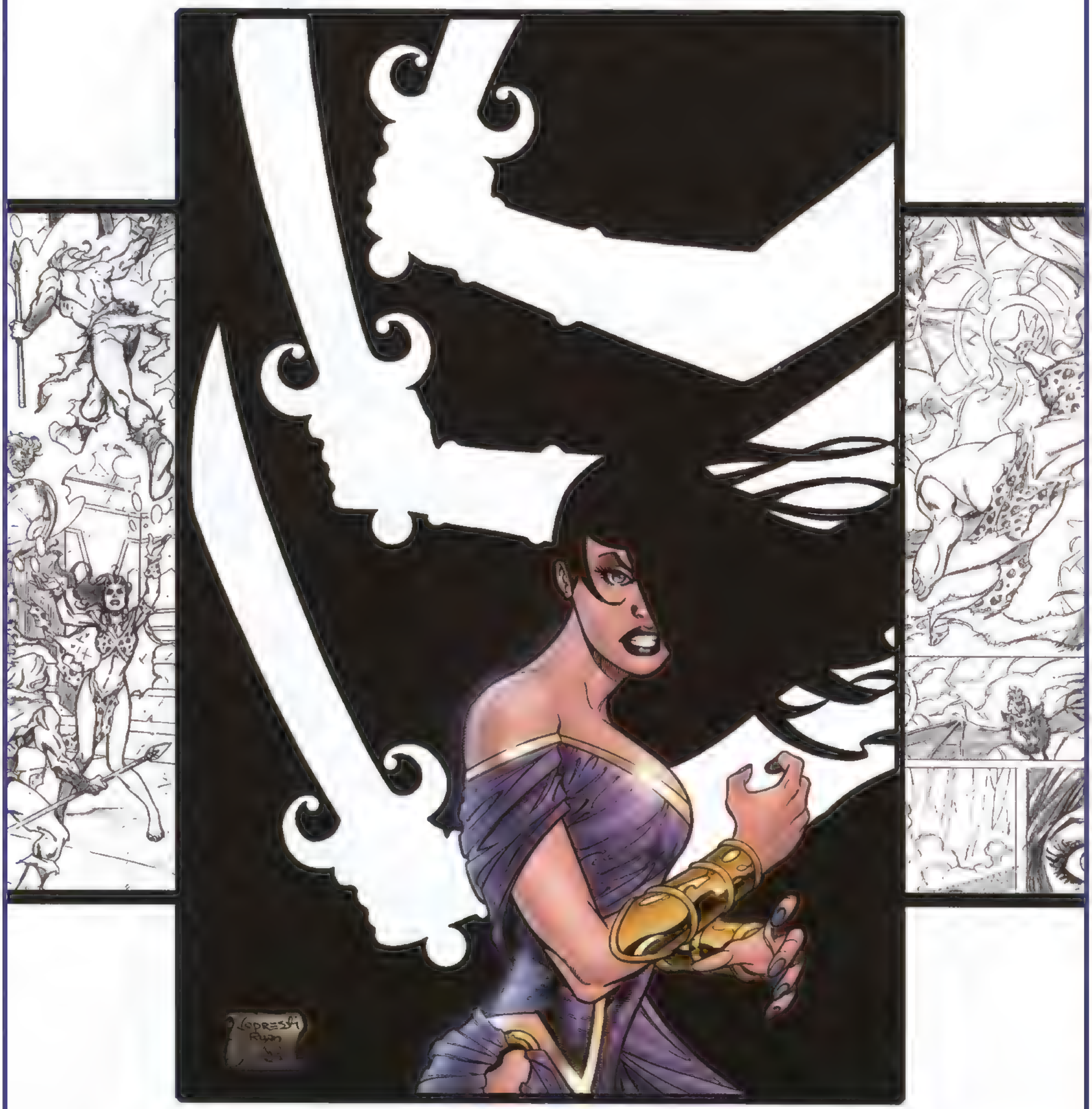
"I've known Aaron for several years, going back to the days when I lured him away from Malibu Comics to work on *Solar, Man Of The Atom* for Valiant. The clean, open, organic nature of his work was very eye-pleasing and emotionally engaging, whether he was drawing a dark, horror-oriented character like Lord Pumpkin, or a bright, heroic figure like Solar.

Years passed as we both bounced from one publisher to the next. Then one day I noticed his work on a book called *Countdown* for WildStorm. If I liked Aaron's work before, I loved it now! Unlike many artists, who never progress beyond a



certain comfortable proficiency, Aaron had obviously pushed his craft to a new level. It's a rare quality in a veteran cartoonist — the relentless commitment to top the last job you did — and Aaron has it in spades! A few months later, after I saw his work in *Time* magazine and learned that Aaron's work on *Left Behind* had outsold anything in the superhero market, it was obvious he could really make a mark at CrossGen. The opening on MYSTIC meant that I'd be the lucky dog who got to work with him!

Between Brandon Peterson and Fabrizio Fiorentino, MYSTIC is a series with a distinct artistic pedigree that many artists would find a challenge to live up to. Aaron blows into the creative line-up like a hurricane, doing the best work of his



career and promising to kick it up a notch with each new issue. Matt, Wil and myself pulled a rabbit out of the proverbial hat the day we hooked up with him on MYSTIC!"

–Tony Bedard, Writer

Lopresti·02
Ryan

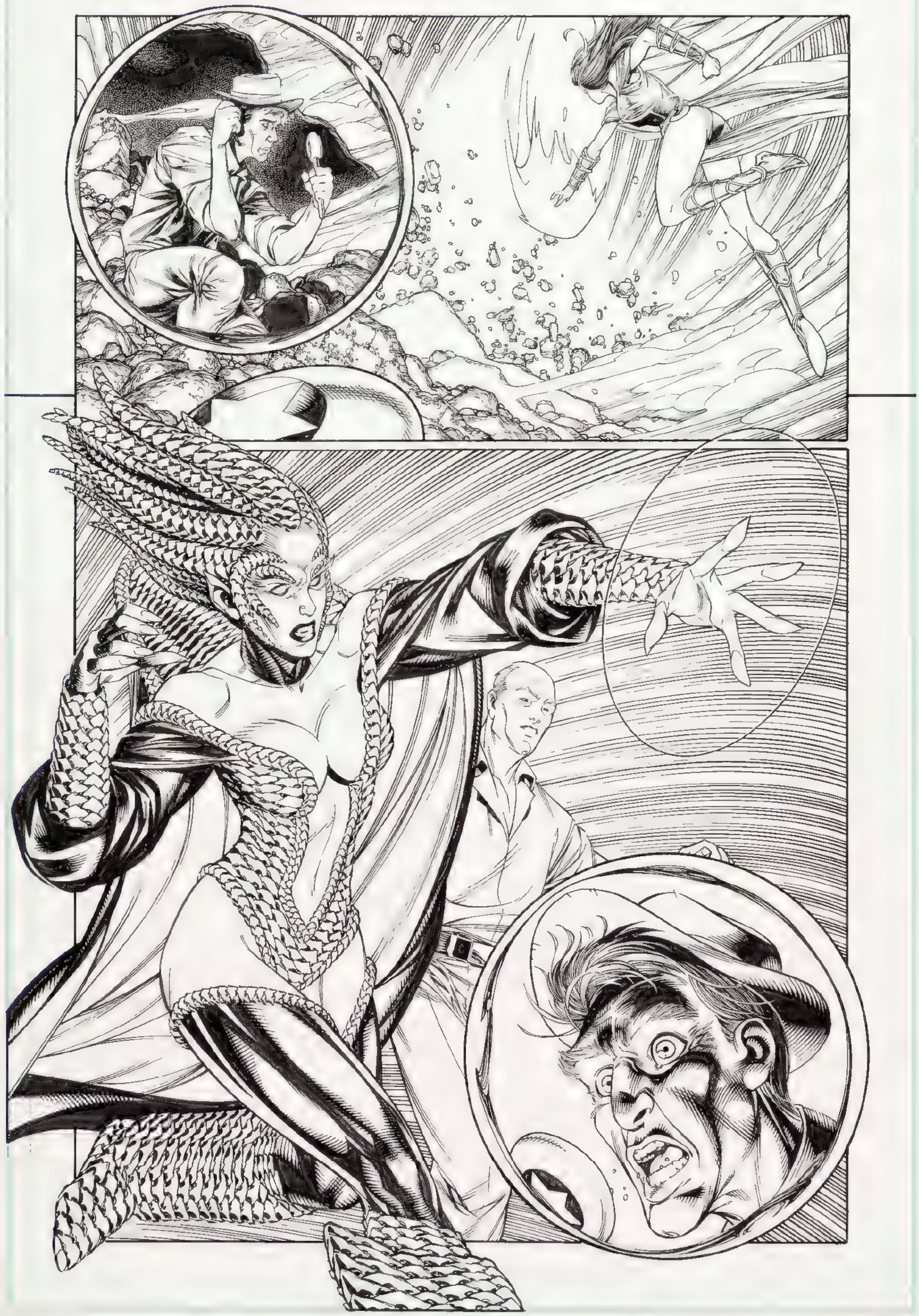
MYSTIC 04 19
BRANDON PETERSON · JOHN DELL

Mystic #4, page 19 art by **Brandon Peterson** & **John Dell**
Courtesy of HeritageAuctions.com

MYSTIC 10 9
BRANDON PETERSON JOHN DELL

Mystic #10, page 9 art by **Brandon Peterson** & **John Dell**
Courtesy of HeritageAuctions.com

MYSTIC ISSUE NO. 14 PAGE 8
BRANDON PETERSON INKS BY JOHN DELL



Mystic #14, page 8 art by **Brandon Peterson** & **John Dell**
Courtesy of HeritageAuctions.com

CROSSGEN COMICS

BOOK TITLE MYSTIC ISSUE NO. 15 PAGE NO. 16

PENCILS BY BRANDON PETERSON INKS BY JOHN DELL

THE DASHED LINE IS WHERE THE BLADES WILL CUT (BLEED), THE DOTTED LINE IS THE FARTHEST POINT LETTERING MAY GO (SAFE)

Mystic #15, page 16 art by **Brandon Peterson** & **John Dell**
Courtesy of HeritageAuctions.com

CROSSGEN COMICS

BOOK TITLE Mystic ISSUE NO. 33 PAGE NO. 5

PENCILS BY Lopresti INKS BY Matthew Ryan

Mystic #33, page 5 art by **Brandon Peterson** & **John Dell**
Courtesy of HeritageAuctions.com

CROSSGEN COMICS

BOOK TITLE Mystic ISSUE NO. 43 PAGE NO. Cover

PENCILS BY LoPresti INKS BY Matthew Ryan

THE DASHED LINE IS WHERE THE BLADES WILL CUT (BLEED), THE DOTTED LINE IS THE FARTHEST POINT LETTERING MAY GO (SAFE)

Mystic #43 cover art by **Aaron Lopresti** & **Matt Ryan**
Courtesy of HeritageAuctions.com

ULTIMATE POWER, UNWANTED RESPONSIBILITY!

On a world where society is based on magic, carefree party girl Giselle Villard wants nothing to do with it — until a mysterious sigil appears on her hand, transforming her into the greatest Mystic ever known! A reluctant Giselle must come to terms with her shocking transformation that puts her at odds not only with her sister, Genevieve, who trained her whole life for this, but also the Guild Masters of Ciress and the planet's greatest evil: the Demon Queen, Animora!

COLLECTING *MYSTIC (2000) #1-43*, *CROSSGEN CHRONICLES #5* AND MATERIAL FROM *CROSSGEN CHRONICLES #1* — WRITTEN BY RON MARZ AND TONY BEDARD; AND ILLUSTRATED BY BRANDON PETERSON, STEVE McNIVEN, KEVIN SHARPE, FABRIZIO FIORENTINO, AL RIO, AARON LOPRESTI, PAUL RYAN, PAUL PELLETIER, CLAUDIO CASTELLINI AND GEORGE PÉREZ.

T+

MARVEL